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Cressy; First family of
Tasajara.

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CRESSY
A FIRST FAMILY OF TASAJARA



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CRESSY

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CRESSY.



CHAPTER I.

As the master of the Indian Spring school emerged from the pine woods into the little clearing before the schoolhouse, he stopped whistling, put his hat less jauntily on his head, threw away some wild flowers he had gathered on his way, and otherwise assumed the severe demeanor of his profession and his mature age — which was at least twenty. Not that he usually felt this an assumption; it was a firm conviction of his serious nature that he impressed others, as he did himself, with the blended austerity and *ennui* of deep and exhausted experience.

The building which was assigned to him and his flock by the Board of Education of Tuolumne County, California, had been originally a church. It still bore a faded odor of sanctity, mingled, however, with a later and slightly alcoholic breath of polit-

ical discussion, the result of its weekly occupation under the authority of the Board as a Tribune for the enunciation of party principles and devotion to the Liberties of the People. There were a few dog-eared hymn-books on the teacher's desk, and the black-board but imperfectly hid an impassioned appeal to the citizens of Indian Spring to "Rally" for Stebbins as Supervisor. The master had been struck with the size of the black type in which this placard was printed, and with a shrewd perception of its value to the round wandering eyes of his smaller pupils, allowed it to remain as a pleasing example of orthography. Unfortunately, although subdivided and spelt by them in its separate letters with painful and perfect accuracy, it was collectively known as "Wally," and its general import productive of vague hilarity.

Taking a large key from his pocket, the master unlocked the door and threw it open, stepping back with a certain precaution begotten of his experience in once finding a small but sociable rattlesnake coiled up near the threshold. A slight disturbance which followed his intrusion showed the value of that precaution, and the fact that the room

had been already used for various private and peaceful gatherings of animated nature. An irregular attendance of yellow-birds and squirrels dismissed themselves hurriedly through the broken floor and windows, but a golden lizard, stiffened suddenly into stony fright on the edge of an open arithmetic, touched the heart of the master so strongly by its resemblance to some kept-in and forgotten scholar who had succumbed over the task he could not accomplish, that he was seized with compunction.

Recovering himself, and reëstablishing, as it were, the decorous discipline of the room by clapping his hands and saying "Sho!" he passed up the narrow aisle of benches, replacing the forgotten arithmetic, and picking up from the desks here and there certain fragmentary pieces of plaster and crumbling wood that had fallen from the ceiling, as if this grove of Academus had been shedding its leaves overnight. When he reached his own desk he lifted the lid and remained for some moments motionless, gazing into it. His apparent meditation however was simply the combined reflection of his own features in a small pocket-mirror in its recesses and a perplexing doubt in his mind whether the

sacrifice of his budding moustache was not essential to the professional austerity of his countenance. But he was presently aware of the sound of small voices, light cries, and brief laughter scattered at vague and remote distances from the schoolhouse — not unlike the birds and squirrels he had just dismissed. He recognized by these signs that it was nine o'clock, and his scholars were assembling.

They came in their usual desultory fashion — the fashion of country school-children the world over — irregularly, spasmodically, and always as if accidentally; a few hand-in-hand, others driven ahead of or dropped behind their elders; some in straggling groups more or less coherent and at times only connected by far-off intermediate voices scattered on a space of half a mile, but never quite alone; always preoccupied by something else than the actual business on hand; appearing suddenly from ditches, behind trunks, and between fence-rails; cropping up in unexpected places along the road after vague and purposeless detours — seemingly going anywhere and everywhere but to school! So unlooked-for, in fact, was their final arrival that the master, who had a few

moments before failed to descry a single torn straw hat or ruined sun-bonnet above his visible horizon, was always startled to find them suddenly under his windows, as if, like the birds, they had alighted from the trees. Nor was their moral attitude towards their duty any the more varied; they always arrived as if tired and reluctant, with a doubting sulkiness that perhaps afterwards beamed into a charming hypocrisy, but invariably temporizing with their instincts until the last moment, and only relinquishing possible truancy on the very threshold. Even after they were marshalled on their usual benches they gazed at each other every morning with a perfectly fresh astonishment and a daily recurring enjoyment of some hidden joke in this tremendous *rencontre*.

It had been the habit of the master to utilize these preliminary vagrancies of his little flock by inviting them on assembling to recount any interesting incident of their journey hither; or failing this, from their not infrequent shyness in expressing what had secretly interested them, any event that had occurred within their knowledge since they last met. He had done this, partly to give them time to recover themselves in that

more formal atmosphere, and partly, I fear, because, notwithstanding his conscientious gravity, it greatly amused him. It also diverted them from their usual round-eyed, breathless contemplation of himself — a regular morning inspection which generally embraced every detail of his dress and appearance, and made every change or deviation the subject of whispered comment or stony astonishment. He knew that they knew him more thoroughly than he did himself, and shrank from the intuitive vision of these small clairvoyants.

“Well?” said the master gravely.

There was the usual interval of bashful hesitation, verging on nervous hilarity or hypocritical attention. For the last six months this question by the master had been invariably received each morning as a veiled pleasantry which might lead to baleful information or conceal some query out of the dreadful books before him. Yet this very element of danger had its fascinations. Johnny Filgee, a small boy, blushed violently, and, without getting up, began hurriedly in a high key, “Tige ith got,” and then suddenly subsided into a whisper.

“Speak up, Johnny,” said the master encouragingly.

"Please, sir, it ain't anythin' he's seed — nor any real news," said Rupert Filgee, his elder brother, rising with family concern and frowning openly upon Johnny; "it's jest his foolishness; he oughter be licked." Finding himself unexpectedly on his feet, and apparently at the end of a long speech, he colored also, and then said hurriedly, "Jimmy Snyder — *he* seed suthin'. Ask *him*!" and sat down — a recognized hero.

Every eye, including the master's, was turned on Jimmy Snyder. But that youthful observer, instantly diving his head and shoulders into his desk, remained there gurgling as if under water. Two or three nearest him endeavored with some struggling to bring him to an intelligible surface again. The master waited patiently. Johnny Filgee took advantage of the diversion to begin again in a high key, "Tige ith got thix," and subsided.

"Come, Jimmy," said the master, with a touch of peremptoriness. Thus adjured, Jimmy Snyder came up glowingly, and bristling with full stops and exclamation points. "Seed a black b'ar comin' outer Daves' woods," he said excitedly. "Nigh to me ez you be. 'N big ez a hoss; 'n snarlin'! 'n

snappin'! — like gosh! Kem along — ker — clump torords me. Reckoned he 'd skeer me! Didn't skeer me worth a cent. I heaved a rock at him — I did now!" (in defiance of murmurs of derisive comment) — "'n he slid. Ef he 'd kem up further I 'd hev up with my slate and swotted him over the snoot — bet your boots!"

The master here thought fit to interfere, and gravely point out that the habit of striking bears as large as a horse with a school-slate was equally dangerous to the slate (which was also the property of Tuolumne County) and to the striker; and that the verb "to swot" and the noun substantive "snoot" were likewise indefensible, and not to be tolerated. Thus admonished Jimmy Snyder, albeit unshaken in his faith in his own courage, sat down.

A slight pause ensued. The youthful Filgee, taking advantage of it, opened in a higher key, "Tige ith" — but the master's attention was here diverted by the searching eyes of Octavia Dean, a girl of eleven, who after the fashion of her sex preferred a personal recognition of her presence before she spoke. Succeeding in catching his eye, she threw back her long hair from her shoulders

with an easy habitual gesture, rose, and with a faint accession of color said :

“Cressy McKinstry came home from Sacramento. Mrs. McKinstry told mother she ’s comin’ back here to school.”

The master looked up with an alacrity perhaps inconsistent with his cynical austerity. Seeing the young girl curiously watching him with an expectant smile, he regretted it. Cressy McKinstry, who was sixteen years old, had been one of the pupils he had found at the school when he first came. But as he had also found that she was there in the extraordinary attitude of being “engaged” to one Seth Davis, a fellow-pupil of nineteen, and as most of the courtship was carried on freely and unceremoniously during school-hours with the full permission of the master’s predecessor, the master had been obliged to point out to the parents of the devoted couple the embarrassing effects of this association on the discipline of the school. The result had been the withdrawal of the lovers, and possibly the good-will of the parents. The return of the young lady was consequently a matter of some significance. Had the master’s protest been accepted, or had the engagement itself been broken off?

Either was not improbable. His momentary loss of attention was Johnny Filgee's great gain.

"Tige," said Johnny, with sudden and alarming distinctness, "ith got thix pupths — mothly yaller."

In the laugh which followed this long withheld announcement of an increase in the family of Johnny's yellow and disreputable setter "Tiger," who usually accompanied him to school and howled outside, the master joined with marked distinctness. Then he said, with equally marked severity, "Books!" The little *levee* was ended, and school began.

It continued for two hours with short sighs, corrugations of small foreheads, the complaining cries and scratchings of slate pencils over slates, and other signs of minor anguish among the more youthful of the flock; and with more or less whisperings, movements of the lips, and unconscious soliloquy among the older pupils. The master moved slowly up and down the aisle with a word of encouragement or explanation here and there, stopping with his hands behind him to gaze abstractedly out of the windows to the wondering envy of the little ones. A faint hum, as of invisible insects, gradually

pervaded the school; the more persistent droning of a large bee had become dangerously soporific. The hot breath of the pines without had invaded the doors and windows; the warped shingles and weather-boarding at times creaked and snapped under the rays of the vertical and unclouded sun. A gentle perspiration broke out like a mild epidemic in the infant class; little curls became damp, brief lashes limp, round eyes moist, and small eyelids heavy. The master himself started, and awoke out of a perilous dream of other eyes and hair to collect himself severely. For the irresolute, half-embarrassed, half-lazy figure of a man had halted doubtingly before the porch and open door. Luckily the children, who were facing the master with their backs to the entrance, did not see it.

Yet the figure was neither alarming nor unfamiliar. The master at once recognized it as Ben Dabney, otherwise known as "Uncle Ben," a good-humored but not over-bright miner, who occupied a small cabin on an unambitious claim in the outskirts of Indian Spring. His avuncular title was evidently only an ironical tribute to his amiable incompetency and heavy good-na-

ture, for he was still a young man with no family ties, and by reason of his singular shyness not even a visitor in the few families of the neighborhood. As the master looked up, he had an irritating recollection that Ben had been already haunting him for the last two days, alternately appearing and disappearing in his path to and from school as a more than usually reserved and bashful ghost. This, to the master's cynical mind, clearly indicated that, like most ghosts, he had something of essentially selfish import to communicate. Catching the apparition's half-appealing eye, he proceeded to exorcise it with a portentous frown and shake of the head, that caused it to timidly wane and fall away from the porch, only however to reappear and wax larger a few minutes later at one of the side windows. The infant class hailing his appearance as a heaven-sent boon, the master was obliged to walk to the door and command him sternly away, when, retreating to the fence, he mounted the uppermost rail, and drawing a knife from his pocket, cut a long splinter from the rail, and began to whittle it in patient and meditative silence. But when recess was declared, and the relieved feelings of the

little flock had vent in the clearing around the schoolhouse, the few who rushed to the spot found that Uncle Ben had already disappeared. Whether the appearance of the children was too inconsistent with his ghostly mission, or whether his heart failed him at the last moment, the master could not determine. Yet, distasteful as the impending interview promised to be, the master was vaguely and irritatingly disappointed.

A few hours later, when school was being dismissed, the master found Octavia Dean lingering near his desk. Looking into the girl's mischievous eyes, he good-humoredly answered their expectation by referring to her morning's news. "I thought Miss McKinstry had been married by this time," he said carelessly.

Octavia, swinging her satchel like a censer, as if she were performing some act of purification over her completed tasks, replied demurely: "Oh no! dear no! — not *that*."

"So it would seem," said the master.

"I reckon she never kalkilated to, either," continued Octavia, slyly looking up from the corner of her lashes.

"Indeed!"

"No — she was just funning with Seth Davis — that's all."

“Funning with him?”

“Yes, sir. Kinder foolin’ him, you know.”

“Kinder foolin’ him!”

For an instant the master felt it his professional duty to protest against this most unmaidenly and frivolous treatment of the matrimonial engagement, but a second glance at the significant face of his youthful auditor made him conclude that her instinctive knowledge of her own sex could be better trusted than his imperfect theories. He turned towards his desk without speaking. Octavia gave an extra swing to her satchel, tossing it over her shoulder with a certain small coquettishness and moved towards the door. As she did so the infant Filgee from the safe vantage of the porch where he had lingered was suddenly impelled to a crowning audacity! As if struck with an original idea, but apparently addressing himself to space, he cried out, “Crethy M’Kinthry likth teacher,” and instantly vanished.

Putting these incidents sternly aside, the master addressed himself to the task of setting a few copies for the next day as the voices of his departing flock faded from the porch. Presently a silence fell upon the little school-house. Through the open door

a cool, restful breath stole gently as if nature were again stealthily taking possession of her own. A squirrel boldly came across the porch, a few twittering birds charging in stopped, beat the air hesitatingly for a moment with their wings, and fell back with bashfully protesting breasts aslant against the open door and the unlooked-for spectacle of the silent occupant. Then there was another movement of intrusion, but this time human, and the master looked up angrily to behold Uncle Ben.

He entered with a slow exasperating step, lifting his large boots very high and putting them down again softly as if he were afraid of some insecurity in the floor, or figuratively recognized the fact that the pathways of knowledge were thorny and difficult. Reaching the master's desk and the ministering presence above it, he stopped awkwardly, and with the rim of his soft felt hat endeavored to wipe from his face the meek smile it had worn when he entered. It chanced also that he had halted before the minute stool of the infant Filgee, and his large figure instantly assumed such Brobdingnagian proportions in contrast that he became more embarrassed than ever. The master

made no attempt to relieve him, but regarded him with cold interrogation.

"I reckoned," he began, leaning one hand on the master's desk with affected ease, as he dusted his leg with his hat with the other, "I reckoned — that is — I allowed — I orter say — that I'd find ye alone at this time. Ye gin'rally are, ye know. It's a nice, soothin', restful, stoodious time, when a man kin, so to speak, run back on his ed-dication and think of all he ever knowed. Ye're jist like me, and ye see I sorter spotted your ways to onct."

"Then why did you come here this morning and disturb the school?" demanded the master sharply.

"That's so, I sorter slipped up thar, did n't I?" said Uncle Ben with a smile of rueful assent. "You see I did n't allow to *come in* then, but on'y to hang round a leetle and kinder get used to it, and it to me."

"Used to what?" said the master impatiently, albeit with a slight softening at his intruder's penitent expression.

Uncle Ben did not reply immediately, but looked around as if for a seat, tried one or two benches and a desk with his large hand

as if testing their security, and finally abandoning the idea as dangerous, seated himself on the raised platform beside the master's chair, having previously dusted it with the flap of his hat. Finding, however, that the attitude was not conducive to explanation, he presently rose again, and picking up one of the school-books from the master's desk eyed it unskilfully upside down, and then said hesitatingly, —

“ I reckon ye ain't usin' Dobell's 'Rithmetic here? ”

“ No,” said the master.

“ That's bad. 'Pears to be played out — that Dobell feller. I was brought up on Dobell. And Parsings' Grammar? Ye don't seem to be a using Parsings' Grammar either? ”

“ No,” said the master, relenting still more as he glanced at Uncle Ben's perplexed face with a faint smile.

“ And I reckon you 'd be saying the same of Jones' 'Stronomy and Algebr'y? Things hev changed. You've got all the new style here,” he continued, with affected carelessness, but studiously avoiding the master's eye. “ For a man ez wos brought up on Parsings, Dobell, and Jones, thar don't appear to be much show nowadays.”

The master did not reply. Observing several shades of color chase each other on Uncle Ben's face, he bent his own gravely over his books. The act appeared to relieve his companion, who with his eyes still turned towards the window went on:

"Ef you 'd had them books — which you haven't — I had it in my mind to ask you suthen'. I had an idea of — of — sort of reviewing my eddication. Kinder going over the old books agin — jist to pass the time. Sorter running in yer arter school hours and doin' a little practisin', eh? You looking on me as an extry scholar — and I payin' ye as sich — but keepin' it 'twixt ourselves, you know — just for a pastime, eh?"

As the master smilingly raised his head, he became suddenly and ostentatiously attracted to the window.

"Them jay birds out there is mighty peart, coming right up to the school-house! I reckon they think it sort o' restful too."

"But if you really mean it, could n't you use these books, Uncle Ben?" said the master cheerfully. "I dare say there's little difference — the principle is the same, you know."

Uncle Ben's face, which had suddenly

brightened, as suddenly fell. He took the book from the master's hand without meeting his eyes, held it at arm's length, turned it over and then laid it softly down upon the desk as if it were some excessively fragile article. "Certingly," he murmured, with assumed reflective ease. "Certingly. The principle's all there." Nevertheless he was quite breathless and a few beads of perspiration stood out upon his smooth, blank forehead.

"And as to writing, for instance," continued the master with increasing heartiness as he took notice of these phenomena, "you know *any* copy-book will do."

He handed his pen carelessly to Uncle Ben. The large hand that took it timidly not only trembled but grasped it with such fatal and hopeless unfamiliarity that the master was fain to walk to the window and observe the birds also.

"They're mighty bold — them jays," said Uncle Ben, laying down the pen with scrupulous exactitude beside the book and gazing at his fingers as if he had achieved a miracle of delicate manipulation. "They don't seem to be afeared of nothing, do they?"

There was another pause. The master

suddenly turned from the window. "I tell you what, Uncle Ben," he said with prompt decision and unshaken gravity, "the only thing for you to do is to just throw over Dobell and Parsons and Jones and the old quill pen that I see you 're accustomed to, and start in fresh as if you 'd never known them. Forget 'em all, you know. It will be mighty hard of course to do that," he continued, looking out of the window, "but you must do it."

He turned back, the brightness that transfigured Uncle Ben's face at that moment brought a slight moisture into his own eyes. The humble seeker of knowledge said hurriedly that he would try.

"And begin again at the beginning," continued the master cheerfully. "Exactly like one of those — in fact, as if you *really* were a child again."

"That 's so," said Uncle Ben, rubbing his hands delightedly, "that 's me! Why, that 's jest what I was sayin' to Roop" —

"Then you 've already been talking about it?" intercepted the master in some surprise. "I thought you wanted it kept secret?"

"Well, yes," responded Uncle Ben dubiously. "But you see I sorter agreed with

Roop Filgee that if you took to my ideas and did n't object, I'd give him two bits¹ every time he'd kem here and help me of an arternoon when you was away and kinder stand guard around the school-house, you know, so as to keep the fellows off. And Roop's mighty sharp for a boy, ye know."

The master reflected a moment and concluded that Uncle Ben was probably right. Rupert Filgee, who was a handsome boy of fourteen, was also a strongly original character whose youthful cynicism and blunt, honest temper had always attracted him. He was a fair scholar, with a possibility of being a better one, and the proposed arrangement with Uncle Ben would not interfere with the discipline of school hours and might help them both. Nevertheless he asked good-humoredly, "But could n't you do this more securely and easily in your own house? I might lend you the books, you know, and come to you twice a week."

Uncle Ben's radiant face suddenly clouded. "It would n't be exactly the same kind o' game to me an' Roop," he said hesitatingly. "You see thar's the idea o' the school-house, ye know, and the restfulness and the quiet,

¹ Two bits, *i. e.*, twenty-five cents.

and the gen'ral air o' study. And the boys around town ez would n't think nothin' o' trapsen' into my cabin if they spotted what I was up to thar, would never dream o' hunting me here."

"Very well," said the master, "let it be here then." Observing that his companion seemed to be struggling with an inarticulate gratitude and an apparently inextricable buckskin purse in his pocket, he added quietly, "I'll set you a few copies to commence with," and began to lay out a few unfinished examples of Master Johnny Filgee's scholastic achievements.

"After thanking *you*, Mr. Ford," said Uncle Ben, faintly, "ef you'll jest kinder signify, you know, what you consider a fair" —

Mr. Ford turned quickly and dexterously offered his hand to his companion in such a manner that he was obliged to withdraw his own from his pocket to grasp it in return. "You're very welcome," said the master, "and as I can only permit this sort of thing gratuitously, you'd better *not* let me know that you propose giving anything even to Rupert." He shook Uncle Ben's perplexed hand again, briefly explained what he had

to do, and saying that he would now leave him alone a few minutes, he took his hat and walked towards the door.

"Then you reckon," said Uncle Ben slowly, regarding the work before him, "that I'd better jest chuck them Dobell fellers overboard?"

"I certainly should," responded the master with infinite gravity.

"And sorter waltz in fresh, like one o' them children?"

"Like a child," nodded the master as he left the porch.

A few moments later, as he was finishing his cigar in the clearing, he paused to glance in at the school-room window. Uncle Ben, stripped of his coat and waistcoat, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up on his powerful arms, had evidently cast Dobell and all misleading extraneous aid aside, and with the perspiration standing out on his foolish forehead, and his perplexed face close to the master's desk, was painfully groping along towards the light in the tottering and devious tracks of Master Johnny Filgee, like a very child indeed!

CHAPTER II.

As the children were slowly straggling to their places the next morning, the master waited for an opportunity to speak to Rupert. That beautiful but scarcely amiable youth was, as usual, surrounded and impeded by a group of his small female admirers, for whom, it is but just to add, he had a supreme contempt. Possibly it was this healthy quality that inclined the master towards him, and it was consequently with some satisfaction that he overheard fragments of his openly disparaging comments upon his worshippers.

“There!” to Clarinda Jones, “don’t flop! And don’t *you*,” to Octavia Dean, “go on breathing over my head like that. If there’s anything I hate it’s having a girl breathing round me. Yes, you were! I felt it in my hair. And *you* too—you’re always snoopin’ and snoodgin’. Oh, yes, you want to know *why* I’ve got an extry copy-book and another ’Rithmetic, Miss Curiosity.

Well, what would you give to know? Want to see if they're *pretty*" (with infinite scorn at the adjective). "No, they ain't *pretty*. That's all you girls think about — what's *pretty* and what's curious! Quit now! Come! Don't ye see teacher lookin' at you? Ain't you ashamed?"

He caught the master's beckoning eye and came forward, slightly abashed, with a flush of irritation still on his handsome face, and his chestnut curls slightly rumpled. One, which Octavia had covertly accented by twisting round her forefinger, stood up like a crest on his head.

"I've told Uncle Ben that you might help him here after school hours," said the master, taking him aside. "You may therefore omit your writing exercise in the morning and do it in the afternoon."

The boy's dark eyes sparkled. "And if it would be all the same to you, sir," he added earnestly, "you might sorter give out in school that I was to be kept in."

"I'm afraid that would hardly do," said the master, much amused. "But why?"

Rupert's color deepened. "So ez to keep them darned girls from foolin' round me and followin' me back here."

"We will attend to that," said the master smiling; a moment after he added more seriously, "I suppose your father knows that you are to receive money for this? And he does n't object?"

"He! Oh no!" returned Rupert with a slight look of astonishment, and the same general suggestion of patronizing his progenitor that he had previously shown to his younger brother. "You need n't mind *him*." In reality Filgee *père*, a widower of two years' standing, had tacitly allowed the discipline of his family to devolve upon Rupert. Remembering this, the master could only say, "Very well," and good-naturedly dismiss the pupil to his seat and the subject from his mind. The last laggard had just slipped in, the master had glanced over the occupied benches with his hand upon his warning bell, when there was a quick step on the gravel, a flutter of skirts like the sound of alighting birds, and a young woman lightly entered.

In the rounded, untouched, and untroubled freshness of her cheek and chin, and the forward droop of her slender neck, she appeared a girl of fifteen; in her developed figure and the maturer drapery of her full

skirts she seemed a woman ; in her combination of naive recklessness and perfect understanding of her person she was both. In spite of a few school-books that jauntily swung from a strap in her gloved hand, she bore no resemblance to a pupil ; in her pretty gown of dotted muslin with bows of blue ribbon on the skirt and corsage, and a cluster of roses in her belt, she was as inconsistent and incongruous to the others as a fashion-plate would have been in the dry and dog-eared pages before them. Yet she carried it off with a demure mingling of the *naïveté* of youth and the *aplomb* of a woman, and as she swept down the narrow aisle, burying a few small wondering heads in the overflow of her flounces, there was no doubt of her reception in the arch smile that dimpled her cheek. Dropping a half curtsy to the master, the only suggestion of her equality with the others, she took her place at one of the larger desks, and resting her elbow on the lid began to quietly remove her gloves. It was Cressy McKinstry.

Irritated and disturbed at the girl's unceremonious entrance, the master for the moment recognized her salutation coldly, and affected to ignore her elaborate appearance.

The situation was embarrassing. He could not decline to receive her as she was no longer accompanied by her lover, nor could he plead entire ignorance of her broken engagement; while to point out the glaring inappropriateness of costume would be a fresh interference he knew Indian Spring would scarcely tolerate. He could only accept such explanation as she might choose to give. He rang his bell as much to avert the directed eyes of the children as to bring the scene to a climax.

She had removed her gloves and was standing up.

"I reckon I can go on where I left off?" she said lazily, pointing to the books she had brought with her.

"For the present," said the master dryly.

The first class was called. Later, when his duty brought him to her side, he was surprised to find that she was evidently already prepared with consecutive lessons, as if she were serenely unconscious of any doubt of her return, and as coolly as if she had only left school the day before. Her studies were still quite elementary, for Cressy McKinstry had never been a brilliant scholar, but he perceived, with a cynical

doubt of its permanency, that she had bestowed unusual care upon her present performance. There was moreover a certain defiance in it, as if she had resolved to stop any objection to her return on the score of deficiencies. He was obliged in self-defence to take particular note of some rings she wore, and a large bracelet that ostentatiously glittered on her white arm — which had already attracted the attention of her companions, and prompted the audible comment from Johnny Filgee that it was “truly gold.” Without meeting her eyes he contented himself with severely restraining the glances of the children that wandered in her direction. She had never been quite popular with the school in her previous *rôle* of *fiancée*, and only Octavia Dean and one or two older girls appreciated its mysterious fascination ; while the beautiful Rupert, secure in his avowed predilection for the middle-aged wife of the proprietor of the Indian Spring hotel, looked upon her as a precocious chit with more than the usual propensity to objectionable “breathing.” Nevertheless the master was irritatingly conscious of her presence — a presence which now had all the absurdity of her ridiculous

love-experiences superadded to it. He tried to reason with himself that it was only a phase of frontier life, which ought to have amused him. But it did not. The intrusion of this preposterous girl seemed to disarrange the discipline of his life as well as of his school. The usual vague, far-off dreams in which he was in the habit of indulging during school-hours, dreams that were perhaps superinduced by the remoteness of his retreat and a certain restful sympathy in his little auditors, which had made him — the grown-up dreamer — acceptable to them in his gentle understanding of their needs and weaknesses, now seemed to have vanished forever.

At recess, Octavia Dean, who had drawn near Cressy and reached up to place her arm round the older girl's waist, glanced at her with a patronizing smile born of some rapid free-masonry, and laughingly retired with the others. The master at his desk, and Cressy who had halted in the aisle were left alone.

"I have had no intimation yet from your father or mother that you were coming back to school again," he began. "But I suppose *they* have decided upon your return?"

An uneasy suspicion of some arrangement with her former lover had prompted the emphasis.

The young girl looked at him with languid astonishment. "I reckon paw and maw ain't no objection," she said with the same easy ignoring of parental authority that had characterized Rupert Filgee, and which seemed to be a local peculiarity. "Maw *did* offer to come yer and see you, but I told her she need n't bother."

She rested her two hands behind her on the edge of a desk, and leaned against it, looking down upon the toe of her smart little shoe which was describing a small semicircle beyond the hem of her gown. Her attitude, which was half-defiant, half-indolent, brought out the pretty curves of her waist and shoulders. The master noticed it and became a trifle more austere.

"Then I am to understand that this is a permanent thing?" he asked coldly.

"What's that?" said Cressy interrogatively.

"Am I to understand that you intend coming regularly to school?" repeated the master curtly, "or is this merely an arrangement for a few days — until" —

"Oh," said Cressy comprehendingly, lifting her unabashed blue eyes to his, "you mean *that*. Oh, *that's* broke off. Yes," she added contemptuously, making a larger semicircle with her foot, "that's over — three weeks ago."

"And Seth Davis — does *he* intend returning too?"

"He!" She broke into a light girlish laugh. "I reckon not much! S'long's I'm here, at least." She had just lifted herself to a sitting posture on the desk, so that her little feet swung clear of the floor in their saucy dance. Suddenly she brought her heels together and alighted. "So that's all?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Kin I go now?"

"Yes."

She laid her books one on the top of the other and lingered an instant.

"Been quite well?" she asked with indolent politeness.

"Yes — thank you."

"You're lookin' right peart."

She walked with a Southern girl's undulating languor to the door, opened it, then charged suddenly upon Octavia Dean, twirled

her round in a wild waltz and bore her away; appearing a moment after on the playground demurely walking with her arm around her companion's waist in an ostentatious confidence at once lofty, exclusive, and exasperating to the smaller children.

When school was dismissed that afternoon and the master had remained to show Rupert Filgee how to prepare Uncle Ben's tasks, and had given his final instructions to his youthful vicegerent, that irascible Adonis unburdened himself querulously :

"Is Cressy McKinstry comin' reg'lar, Mr. Ford?"

"She is," said the master dryly. After a pause he asked, "Why?"

Rupert's curls had descended on his eyebrows in heavy discontent. "It's mighty rough, jest ez a feller reckons he's got quit of her and her jackass bo', to hev her prancin' back inter school agin, and rigged out like ez if she 'd been to a fire in a milliner's shop."

"You should n't allow your personal dislikes, Rupert, to provoke you to speak of a fellow-scholar in that way — and a young lady, too," corrected the master dryly.

"The woods is full o' sich feller-scholars

and sich young ladies, if yer keer to go a gunning for 'em," said Rupert with dark and slangy significance. "Ef I'd known she was comin' back I'd" — he stopped and brought his sunburnt fist against the seam of his trousers with a boyish gesture, "I'd hev jist" —

"What?" said the master sharply.

"I'd hev played hookey till she left school agin! It mout n't hev bin so long, neither," he added with a mysterious chuckle.

"That will do," said the master peremptorily. "For the present you'll attend to your duty and try to make Uncle Ben see you're something more than a foolish, prejudiced school-boy, or," he added significantly, "he and I may both repent our agreement. Let me have a good account of you both when I return."

He took his hat from its peg on the wall, and in obedience to a suddenly formed resolution left the school-room to call upon the parents of Cressy McKinstry. He was not quite certain what he should say, but, after his habit, would trust to the inspiration of the moment. At the worst he could resign a situation that now appeared to require

more tact and delicacy than seemed consistent with his position, and he was obliged to confess to himself that he had lately suspected that his present occupation — the temporary expedient of a poor but clever young man of twenty — was scarcely bringing him nearer a realization of his daily dreams. For Mr. Jack Ford was a youthful pilgrim who had sought his fortune in California so lightly equipped that even in the matter of kin and advisers he was deficient. That prospective fortune had already eluded him in San Francisco, had apparently not waited for him in Sacramento, and now seemed never to have been at Indian Spring. Nevertheless, when he was once out of sight of the school-house he lit a cigar, put his hands in his pockets, and strode on with the cheerfulness of that youth to which all things are possible.

The children had already dispersed as mysteriously and completely as they had arrived. Between him and the straggling hamlet of Indian Spring the landscape seemed to be without sound or motion. The wooded upland or ridge on which the school-house stood, half a mile further on, began to slope gradually towards the river, on whose

banks, seen from that distance, the town appeared to have been scattered irregularly or thrown together hastily, as if cast ashore by some overflow — the Cosmopolitan Hotel drifting into the Baptist church, and dragging in its tail of wreckage two saloons and a blacksmith's shop; while the County Court-house was stranded in solitary grandeur in a waste of gravel half a mile away. The intervening flat was still gashed and furrowed by the remorseless engines of earlier gold-seekers.

Mr. Ford was in little sympathy with this unsuccessful record of frontier endeavor — the fortune *he* had sought did not seem to lie in that direction — and his eye glanced quickly beyond it to the pine-crested hills across the river, whose primeval security was so near and yet so inviolable, or back again to the trail he was pursuing along the ridge. The latter prospect still retained its semi-savage character in spite of the occasional suburban cottages of residents, and the few outlying farms or ranches of the locality. The grounds of the cottages were yet uncleared of underbrush; bear and catamount still prowled around the rude fences of the ranches; the late alleged experience of the

infant Snyder was by no means improbable or unprecedented.

A light breeze was seeking the heated flat and river, and thrilling the leaves around him with the strong vitality of the forest. The vibrating cross-lights and tremulous chequers of shade cast by the stirred foliage seemed to weave a fantastic net around him as he walked. The quaint odors of certain woodland herbs known to his scholars, and religiously kept in their desks, or left like votive offerings on the threshold of the school-house, recalled all the primitive simplicity and delicious wildness of the little temple he had left. Even in the mischievous glances of evasive squirrels and the moist eyes of the contemplative rabbits there were faint suggestions of some of his own truants. The woods were trembling with gentle memories of the independence he had always known here — of that sweet and grave retreat now so ridiculously invaded.

He began to hesitate, with one of those revulsions of sentiment characteristic of his nature: Why should he bother himself about this girl after all? Why not make up his mind to accept her as his predecessor had done? Why was it necessary for him to

find her inconsistent with his ideas of duty to his little flock and his mission to them? Was he not assuming a sense of decorum that was open to misconception? The absurdity of her school costume, and any responsibility it incurred, rested not with him but with her parents. What right had he to point it out to them, and above all how was he to do it? He halted irresolutely at what he believed was his sober second thought, but which, like most reflections that take that flattering title, was only a reaction as impulsive and illogical as the emotion that preceded it.

Mr. McKinstry's "snake rail" fence was already discernible in the lighter opening of the woods, not far from where he had halted. As he stood there in hesitation, the pretty figure and bright gown of Cressy McKinstry suddenly emerged from a more secluded trail that intersected his own at an acute angle a few rods ahead of him. She was not alone, but was accompanied by a male figure whose arm she had evidently just dislodged from her waist. He was still trying to resume his lost vantage; she was as resolutely evading him with a certain nymph-like agility, while the sound of her half-laughing,

half-irate protest could be faintly heard. Without being able to identify the face or figure of her companion at that distance, he could see that it was *not* her former betrothed, Seth Davis.

A superior smile crossed his face; he no longer hesitated, but at once resumed his former path. For some time Cressy and her companion moved on quietly before him. Then on reaching the rail-fence they turned abruptly to the right, were lost for an instant in the intervening thicket, and the next moment Cressy appeared alone, crossing the meadow in a shorter cut towards the house, having either scaled the fence or slipped through some familiar gap. Her companion had disappeared. Whether they had noticed that they were observed he could not determine. He kept steadily along the trail that followed the line of fence to the lane that led directly to the farm-building, and pushed open the front gate as Cressy's light dress vanished round an angle at the rear of the house.

The house of the McKinstrys rose, or rather stretched, itself before him, in all the lazy ungainliness of Southwestern architecture. A collection of temporary make-

shifts of boards, of logs, of canvas, prematurely decayed, and in some instances abandoned for a newer erection, or degraded to mere outhouses—it presented with singular frankness the nomadic and tentative disposition of its founder. It had been repaired without being improved; its additions had seemed only to extend its primitive ugliness over a larger space. Its roofs were roughly shingled or rudely boarded and battened, and the rafters of some of its “lean-to’s” were simply covered with tarred canvas. As if to settle any doubt of the impossibility of this heterogeneous mass ever taking upon itself any picturesque combination, a small building of corrugated iron, transported in sections from some remoter locality, had been set up in its centre. The McKinstry ranch had long been an eyesore to the master: even that morning he had been mutely wondering from what convolution of that hideous chrysalis the bright butterfly Cressy had emerged. It was with a renewal of this curiosity that he had just seen her flutter back to it again.

A yellow dog who had observed him hesitating in doubt where he should enter, here yawned, rose from the sunlight where he had

been blinking, approached the master with languid politeness, and then turned towards the iron building as if showing him the way. Mr. Ford followed him cautiously, painfully conscious that his hypocritical canine introducer was only availing himself of an opportunity to gain ingress into the house, and was leading him as a responsible accomplice to probable exposure and disgrace. His expectation was quickly realized: a lazily querulous, feminine outcry, with the words, "Yer's that darned hound agin!" came from an adjacent room, and his exposed and abashed companion swiftly retreated past him into the road again. Mr. Ford found himself alone in a plainly-furnished sitting-room confronting the open door leading to another apartment at which the figure of a woman, preceded hastily by a thrown dish-cloth, had just appeared. It was Mrs. McKinstry; her sleeves were rolled up over her red but still shapely arms, and as she stood there wiping them on her apron, with her elbows advanced, and her closed hands raised alternately in the air, there was an odd pugilistic suggestion in her attitude. It was not lessened on her sudden discovery of the master by her retreating backwards with

her hands up and her elbows still well forward as if warily retiring to an imaginary "corner."

Mr. Ford at once tactfully stepped back from the doorway. "I beg your pardon," he said, delicately addressing the opposite wall, "but I found the door open and I followed the dog."

"That's just one of his pizenous tricks," responded Mrs. McKinstry dolefully from within. "On'y last week he let in a Chinaman, and in the nat'ral hustlin' that follered he managed to help himself out the pork bar'l. There ain't no shade o' cussedness that or'nary hound ain't up to." Yet notwithstanding this ominous comparison she presently made her appearance with her sleeves turned down, her black woollen dress "tidied," and a smile of fatigued but not unkindly welcome and protection on her face. Dusting a chair with her apron and placing it before the master, she continued maternally, "Now that you're here, set ye right down and make yourself to home. My men folks are all out o' door, but some of 'em's sure to happen in soon for suthin'; that day ain't yet created that they don't come huntin' up Mammy McKinstry every five minutes for this thing or that."

The glow of a certain hard pride burned through the careworn languor of her brown cheek. What she had said was strangely true. This raw-boned woman before him, although scarcely middle-aged, had for years occupied a self-imposed maternal and protecting relation, not only to her husband and brothers, but to the three or four men, who as partners, or hired hands, lived at the ranch. An inherited and trained sympathy with what she called her "boys" and her "men folk," and their needs had partly unsexed her. She was a fair type of a class not uncommon on the Southwestern frontier; women who were ruder helpmeets of their rude husbands and brothers, who had shared their privations and sufferings with surly, masculine endurance, rather than feminine patience; women who had sent their loved ones to hopeless adventure or terrible *vendetta* as a matter of course, or with partisan fury; who had devotedly nursed the wounded to keep alive the feud, or had received back their dead dry-eyed and revengeful. Small wonder that Cressy McKinstry had developed strangely under this sexless relationship. Looking at the mother, albeit not without a certain respect — Mr.

Ford found himself contrasting her with the daughter's graceful femininity, and wondering where in Cressy's youthful contour the possibility of the grim figure before him was even now hidden.

"Hiram allowed to go over to the school-house and see you this mornin'," said Mrs. McKinstry, after a pause; "but I reckon ez how he had to look up stock on the river. The cattle are that wild this time o' year, huntin' water, and hangin' round the *tules*, that my men are nigh worried out o' their butes with 'em. Hank and Jim ain't been off their mustangs since sun up, and Hiram, what with partrollen' the West Boundary all night, watchin' stakes whar them low down Harrisons hev been trespassin' — has n't put his feet to the ground in fourteen hours. Mebbe you noticed Hiram ez you kem along? Ef so, ye did n't remember what kind o' shootin' irons he had with him? I see his rifle over yon. Like ez not he 'z only got his six-shooter, and them Harrisons are mean enough to lay for him at long range. But," she added, returning to the less important topic, "I s'pose Cressy came all right."

"Yes," said the master hopelessly.

"I reckon she looked so," continued Mrs. McKinstry, with tolerant abstraction. "She allowed to do herself credit in one of them new store gownds that she got at Sacramento. At least that's what some of our men said. Late years, I ain't kept tech with the fashions myself." She passed her fingers explanatorily down the folds of her own coarse gown, but without regret or apology.

"She seemed well prepared in her lessons," said the master, abandoning for the moment that criticism of his pupil's dress, which he saw was utterly futile, "but am I to understand that she is coming regularly to school — that she is now perfectly free to give her entire attention to her studies — that — that — her — engagement is broken off?"

"Why, did n't she tell ye?" echoed Mrs. McKinstry in languid surprise.

"*She* certainly did," said the master with slight embarrassment, "but" —

"Ef *she* said so," interrupted Mrs. McKinstry abstractedly, "she oughter know, and you kin tie to what she says."

"But as I'm responsible to *parents* and not to scholars for the discipline of my school," returned the young man a little

stiffly, "I thought it my duty to hear it from *you*."

"That's so," said Mrs. McKinstry meditatively; "then I reckon you'd better see Hiram. That ar' Seth Davis engagement was a matter of hern and her father's, and not in *my* line. I 'spose that Hiram naturally allows to set the thing square to you and inquiren' friends."

"I hope you understand," said the master, slightly resenting the classification, "that my reason for inquiring about the permanency of your daughter's attendance was simply because it might be necessary to arrange her studies in a way more suitable to her years; perhaps even to suggest to you that a young ladies' seminary might be more satisfactory" —

"Sartain, sartain," interrupted Mrs. McKinstry hurriedly, but whether from evasion of annoying suggestion or weariness of the topic, the master could not determine. "You'd better speak to Hiram about it. On'y," she hesitated slightly, "ez he's got now sorter set and pintoed towards your school, and is a trifle worried with stock and them Harrisons, ye might tech it lightly. He oughter be along yer now. I

can't think what keeps him." Her eye wandered again with troubled preoccupation to the corner where her husband's Sharps' rifle stood. Suddenly she raised her voice as if forgetful of Mr. Ford's presence.

"O Cressy!"

"O Maw!"

The response came from the inner room. The next moment Cressy appeared at the door with an odd half-lazy defiance in her manner, which the master could not understand except upon the hypothesis that she had been listening. She had already changed her elaborate toilet for a long clinging, coarse blue gown, that accented the graceful curves of her slight, petticoatless figure. Nodding her head towards the master, she said, "Howdy?" and turned to her mother, who practically ignored their personal acquaintance. "Cressy," she said, "Dad's gone and left his Sharps' yer, d'ye mind takin' it along to meet him, afore he passes the Boundary corner. Ye might tell him the teacher's yer, wantin' to see him."

"One moment," said the master, as the young girl carelessly stepped to the corner and lifted the weapon. "Let me take it. It's all on my way back to school and I'll meet him."

Mrs. McKinstry looked perturbed. Cressy opened her clear eyes on the master with evident surprise. "No, Mr. Ford," said Mrs. McKinstry, with her former maternal manner. "Ye'd better not mix yourself up with these yer doin's. Ye've no call to do it, and Cressy has; it's all in the family. But it's outer *your* line, and them Harrison whelps go to your school. Fancy the teacher takin' weppins betwixt and between!"

"It's fitter work for the teacher than for one of his scholars, and a young lady at that," said Mr. Ford gravely, as he took the rifle from the hands of the half-amused, half-reluctant girl. "It's quite safe with me, and I promise I shall deliver it into Mr. McKinstry's hands and none other."

"Perhaps it would n't be ez likely to be gin'rally noticed ez it would if one of *us* carried it," murmured Mrs. McKinstry in confidential abstraction, gazing at her daughter sublimely unconscious of the presence of a third party.

"You're quite right," said the master composedly, throwing the rifle over his shoulder and turning towards the door. "So I'll say good-afternoon, and try and find your husband."

Mrs. McKinstry constrainedly plucked at the folds of her coarse gown. "Ye 'll like a drink afore ye go," she said, in an ill-concealed tone of relief. "I clean forgot my manners. Cressy, fetch out that demijohn."

"Not for me, thank you," returned Mr. Ford smiling.

"Oh, I see — you're temperance, naturally," said Mrs. McKinstry with a tolerant sigh.

"Hardly that," returned the master; "I follow no rule, I drink sometimes — but not to-day."

Mrs. McKinstry's dark face contracted. "Don't you see, Maw," struck in Cressy quickly. "Teacher drinks sometimes, but he don't *use* whiskey. That's all."

Her mother's face relaxed. Cressy slipped out of the door before the master, and preceded him to the gate. When she had reached it she turned and looked into his face.

"What did Maw say to yer about seein' me just now?"

"I don't understand you."

"To your seein' me and Joe Masters on the trail?"

"She said nothing."

"Humph," said Cressy meditatively.
"What was it you told her about it?"

"Nothing."

"Then you *did* n't see us?"

"I saw you with some one — I don't know whom."

"And you did n't tell Maw?"

"I did not. It was none of my business."

He instantly saw the utter inconsistency of this speech in connection with the reason he believed he had in coming. But it was too late to recall it, and she was looking at him with a bright but singular expression.

"That Joe Masters is the conceitedest fellow goin'. I told him you could see his foolishness."

"Ah, indeed."

Mr. Ford pushed open the gate. As the girl still lingered he was obliged to hold it a moment before passing through.

"Maw could n't quite hitch on to your not drinkin'. She reckons you're like everybody else about yer. That's where she slips up on you. And everybody else, I kalkilate."

"I suppose she's somewhat anxious about your father, and I dare say is expecting me to hurry," returned the master pointedly.

"Oh, dad 's all right," said Cressy mischievously. "You 'll come across him over yon, in the clearing. But you 're looking right purty with that gun. It kinder sets you off. You oughter wear one."

The master smiled slightly, said "Good-by," and took leave of the girl, but not of her eyes, which were still following him. Even when he had reached the end of the lane and glanced back at the rambling dwelling, she was still leaning on the gate with one foot on the lower rail and her chin cupped in the hollow of her hand. She made a slight gesture, not clearly intelligible at that distance; it might have been a mischievous imitation of the way he had thrown the gun over his shoulder, it might have been a wafted kiss.

The master however continued his way in no very self-satisfied mood. Although he did not regret having taken the place of Cressy as the purveyor of lethal weapons between the belligerent parties, he knew he was tacitly mingling in the feud between people for whom he cared little or nothing. It was true that the Harrisons sent their children to his school, and that in the fierce partisanship of the locality this simple cour-

tesy was open to misconstruction. But he was more uneasily conscious that this mission, so far as Mrs. McKinstry was concerned, was a miserable failure. The strange relations of the mother and daughter perhaps explained much of the girl's conduct, but it offered no hope of future amelioration. Would the father, "worried by stock" and boundary quarrels — a man in the habit of cutting Gordian knots with a bowie knife — prove more reasonable? Was there any nearer sympathy between father and daughter? But she had said he would meet McKinstry in the clearing: she was right, for here he was coming forward at a gallop!

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CHAPTER III.

WHEN within a dozen paces of the master, McKinstry, scarcely checking his mustang, threw himself from the saddle, and with a sharp cut of his *riata* on the animal's haunches sent him still galloping towards the distant house. Then, with both hands deeply thrust in the side pockets of his long, loose linen coat, he slowly lounged with clanking spurs towards the young man. He was thick-set, of medium height, densely and reddishly bearded, with heavy-lidded pale blue eyes that wore a look of drowsy pain, and after their first wearied glance at the master, seemed to rest anywhere but on him.

"Your wife was sending you your rifle by Cressy," said the master, "but I offered to bring it myself, as I thought it scarcely a proper errand for a young lady. Here it is. I hope you didn't miss it before and don't require it now," he added quietly.

Mr. McKinstry took it in one hand with an air of slightly embarrassed surprise,

rested it against his shoulder, and then with the same hand and without removing the other from his pocket, took off his soft felt hat, showed a bullet-hole in its rim, and returned lazily, "It 's about half an hour late, but them Harrisons reckoned I was fixed for 'em and war too narvous to draw a clear bead on me."

The moment was evidently not a felicitous one for the master's purpose, but he was determined to go on. He hesitated an instant, when his companion, who seemed to be equally but more sluggishly embarrassed, in a moment of preoccupied perplexity withdrew from his pocket his right hand swathed in a blood-stained bandage, and following some instinctive habit, attempted, as if reflectively, to scratch his head with two stiffened fingers.

"You are hurt," said the master, genuinely shocked, "and here I am detaining you."

"I had my hand up — so," explained McKinstry, with heavy deliberation, "and the ball raked off my little finger after it went through my hat. But that ain't what I wanted to say when I stopped ye. I ain't just kam enough yet," he apologized in the

calmest manner, "and I clean forgit myself," he added with perfect self-possession. "But I was kalkilatin' to ask you" — he laid his bandaged hand familiarly on the master's shoulder — "if Cressy kem all right?"

"Perfectly," said the master. "But shan't I walk on home with you, and we can talk together after your wound is attended to?"

"And she looked purty?" continued McKinstry without moving.

"Very."

"And you thought them new store gownds of hers right peart?"

"Yes," said the master. "Perhaps a little too fine for the school, you know," he added insinuatingly, "and" —

"Not for her — not for her," interrupted McKinstry. "I reckon thar's more whar that cam from! Ye need n't fear but that she kin keep up that gait ez long ez Hiram McKinstry hez the runnin' of her."

Mr. Ford gazed hopelessly at the hideous ranch in the distance, at the sky, and the trail before him; then his glance fell upon the hand still upon his shoulder, and he struggled with a final effort. "At another time I'd like to have a long talk with you about your daughter, Mr. McKinstry."

"Talk on," said McKinstry, putting his wounded hand through the master's arm. "I admire to hear you. You 're that kam, it does me good."

Nevertheless the master was conscious that his own arm was scarcely as firm as his companion's. It was however useless to draw back now, and with as much tact as he could command he relieved his mind of its purpose. Addressing the obtruding bandage before him, he dwelt upon Cressy's previous attitude in the school, the danger of any relapse, the necessity of her having a more clearly defined position as a scholar, and even the advisability of her being transferred to a more advanced school with a more mature teacher of her own sex. "This is what I wished to say to Mrs. McKinstry to-day," he concluded, "but she referred me to you."

"In course, in course," said McKinstry, nodding complacently. "She's a good woman in and around the ranch, and in any doin's o' this kind," he lightly waved his wounded arm in the air, "there ain't a better, tho' I say it. She was Blair Rawlins' darter; she and her brother Clay bein' the only ones that kem out safe arter their twenty years' fight with the McEntees in West

Kaintuck. But she don't understand gals ez you and me do. Not that I'm much, ez I orter be more kam. And the old woman jest sized the hull thing when she said *she* had n't any hand in Cressy's engagement. No more she had! And ez far ez that goes, no more did me, nor Seth Davis, nor Cressy." He paused, and lifting his heavy-lidded eyes to the master for the second time, said reflectively, "Ye must n't mind my tellin' ye — ez betwixt man and man — that *the* one ez is most responsible for the makin' and breakin' o' that engagement is *you*!"

"Me!" said the master in utter bewilderment.

"You!" repeated McKinstry quietly, re-installing the hand Ford had attempted to withdraw. "I ain't sayin' ye either know'd it or kalkilated on it. But it war so. Ef ye 'd hark to me, and meander on a little, I'll tell ye *how* it war. I don't mind walkin' a piece *your* way, for if we go towards the ranch, and the hounds see me, they'll set up a racket and bring out the old woman, and then good-by to any confidential talk betwixt you and me. And I'm, somehow, kammer out yer."

He moved slowly down the trail, still

holding Ford's arm confidentially, although, owing to his large protecting manner, he seemed to offer a ridiculous suggestion of supporting *him* with his wounded member.

"When you first kem to Injin Spring," he began, "Seth and Cressy was goin' to school, boy and girl like, and nothin' more. They'd known each other from babies — the Davises bein' our neighbors in Kaintuck, and emigraten' with us from St. Joe. Seth mout hev cottoned to Cress, and Cress to him, in course o' time, and there was n't anythin' betwixt the families to hev kept 'em from marryin' when they wanted. But there never war any words passed, and no engagement."

"But," interrupted Ford hastily, "my predecessor, Mr. Martin, distinctly told me that there was, and that it was with *your* permission."

"That's only because you noticed suthin' the first day you looked over the school with Martin. 'Dad,' sez Cress to me, 'that new teacher's very peart; and he's that keen about noticin' me and Seth that I reckon you'd better giv out that we're engaged.' 'But are you?' sez I. 'It'll come to that in the end,' sez Cress, 'and if that yer teacher

hez come here with Northern ideas o' society, it's just ez well to let him see Injin Spring ain't entirely in the woods about them things either.' So I agreed, and Martin told you it was all right; Cress and Seth was an engaged couple, and you was to take no notice. And then *you* ups and objects to the hull thing, and allows that courtin' in school, even among engaged pupils, ain't proper."

The master turned his eyes with some uneasiness to the face of Cressy's father. It was heavy but impassive.

"I don't mind tellin' you, now that it's over, what happened. The trouble with me, Mr. Ford, is—I ain't kam! and *you* air, and that's what got me. For when I heard what you 'd said, I got on that mustang and started for the school-house to clean you out and giv' you five minutes to leave Injin Spring. I don't know ez you remember that day. I'd kalkilated my time so ez to ketch ye comin' out o' school, but I was too airly. I hung around out o' sight, and then hitched my hoss to a buckeye and peeped inter the winder to hev a good look at ye. It was very quiet and kam. There was squirrels over the roof, yellow-jackets and bees dronin' away, and kinder sleeping-like all around in

the air, and jay-birds twitterin' in the shingles, and they never minded me. You were movin' up and down among them little gals and boys, liftin' up their heads and talkin' to 'em softly and quiet like, ez if you was one of them yourself. And they looked contented and kam. And onct — I don't know if *you* remember it — you kem close up to the winder with your hands behind you, and looked out so kam and quiet and so far off, ez if everybody else outside the school was miles away from you. It kem to me then that I 'd given a heap to hev had the old woman see you thar. It kem to me, Mr. Ford, that there was n't any place for *me* thar; and it kem to me, too — and a little rough like — that mebbe there was n't any place there for *my* Cress either! So I rode away without disturbin' you nor the birds nor the squirrels. Talkin' with Cress that night, she said ez how it was a fair sample of what happened every day, and that you 'd always treated her fair like the others. So she allowed that she 'd go down to Sacramento, and get some things agin her and Seth bein' married next month, and she reckoned she would n't trouble you nor the school agin. Hark till I've done, Mr.

Ford," he continued, as the young man made a slight movement of deprecation. "Well, I agreed. But arter she got to Sacramento and bought some fancy fixin's, she wrote to me and sez ez how she'd been thinkin' the hull thing over, and she reckoned that she and Seth were too young to marry, and the engagement had better be broke. And I broke it for her."

"But how?" asked the bewildered master.

"Gin'rally with this gun," returned McKinsty with slow gravity, indicating the rifle he was carrying, "for I ain't kam. I let on to Seth's father that if I ever found Seth and Cressy together again, I'd shoot him. It made a sort o' coolness betwixt the families, and hez given some comfort to them low-down Harrisons; but even the law, I reckon, recognizes a father's rights. And ez Cress sez, now ez Seth's out o' the way, thar ain't no reason why she can't go back to school and finish her eddication. And I reckoned she was right. And we both agreed that ez she'd left school to git them store clothes, it was only fair that she'd give the school the benefit of 'em."

The case seemed more hopeless than ever.

The master knew that the man beside him might hardly prove as lenient to a second objection at his hand. But that very reason, perhaps, impelled him, now that he knew his danger, to consider it more strongly as a duty, and his pride revolted from a possible threat underlying McKinstry's confidences. Nevertheless he began gently :

"But you are quite sure you won't regret that you did n't avail yourself of this broken engagement, and your daughter's outfit — to send her to some larger boarding-school in Sacramento or San Francisco? Don't you think she may find it dull, and soon tire of the company of mere children when she has already known the excitement of " — he was about to say "a lover," but checked himself, and added, "a young girl's freedom?"

"Mr. Ford," returned McKinstry, with the slow and fatuous misconception of a one-ideaed man, "when I said just now that, lookin' inter that kam, peaceful school of yours, I did n't find a place for Cress, it war n't because I did n't think she *oughter* hev a place thar. Thar was that thar wot she never had ez a little girl with me and the old woman, and that she could n't find ez a grownd up girl in any boarding-school

—the home of a child; that kind o' innocent foolishness that I sometimes reckon must hev slipped outer our emigrant wagon comin' across the plains, or got left behind at St. Joe. She was a grownd girl fit to marry afore she was a child. She had young fellers a-sparkin' her afore she ever played with 'em ez boy and girl. I don't mind tellin' you that it wer n't in the natur of Blair Rawlins' darter to teach her own darter any better, for all she's been a mighty help to me. So if it's all the same to you, Mr. Ford, we won't talk about a grownd up school; I'd rather Cress be a little girl again among them other children. I should be a powerful sight more kam if I knowed that when I was away huntin' stock or fightin' stakes with them Harrisons, that she was a settin' there with them and the birds and the bees, and listenin' to them and to you. Mebbe there's been a little too many scrimmages goin' on round the ranch sence she's been a child; mebbe she orter know suthin' more of a man than a feller who sparks her and fights for her."

The master was silent. Had this dull, narrow-minded partisan stumbled upon a truth that had never dawned upon his own

broader comprehension? Had this selfish savage and literally red-handed frontier brawler been moved by some dumb instinct of the power of gentleness to understand his daughter's needs better than he? For a moment he was staggered. Then he thought of Cressy's later flirtations with Joe Masters, and her concealment of their meeting from her mother. Had she deceived her father also? Or was not the father deceiving him with this alternate suggestion of threat and of kindness — of power and weakness. He had heard of this cruel phase of South-western cunning before. With the feeble sophistry of the cynic he mistrusted the good his scepticism could not understand. Howbeit, glancing sideways at the slumbering savagery of the man beside him, and his wounded hand, he did not care to show his lack of confidence. He contented himself with that equally feeble resource of weak humanity in such cases — good-natured indifference. "All right," he said carelessly; "I'll see what can be done. But are you quite sure you are fit to go home alone? Shall I accompany you?" As McKinstry waived the suggestion with a gesture, he added lightly, as if to conclude the inter-

view, "I'll report progress to you from time to time, if you like."

"To *me*," emphasized McKinstry; "not over *thar*," indicating the ranch. "But p'rhaps *you* would n't mind my ridin' by and lookin' in at the school-room winder onct in a while? Ah — *you would*," he added, with the first deepening of color he had shown. "Well, never mind."

"You see it might distract the children from their lessons," explained the master gently, who had however contemplated with some concern the infinite delight which a glimpse of McKinstry's fiery and fatuous face at the window would awaken in Johnny Filgee's infant breast.

"Well, no matter!" returned McKinstry slowly. "Ye don't keer, I s'pose, to come over to the hotel and take suthin'? A julep or a smash?"

"I should n't think of keeping you a moment longer from Mrs. McKinstry," said the master, looking at his companion's wounded hand. "Thank you all the same. Good-by."

They shook hands, McKinstry transferring his rifle to the hollow of his elbow to offer his unwounded left. The master

watched him slowly resume his way towards the ranch. Then with a half uneasy and half pleasurable sense that he had taken some step whose consequences were more important than he would at present understand, he turned in the opposite direction to the school-house. He was so preoccupied that it was not until he had nearly reached it that he remembered Uncle Ben. With an odd recollection of McKinstry's previous performance, he approached the school from the thicket in the rear and slipped noiselessly to the open window with the intention of looking in. But the school-house, far from exhibiting that "kam" and studious abstraction which had so touched the savage breast of McKinstry, was filled with the accents of youthful and unrestrained vituperation. The voice of Rupert Filgee came sharply to the master's astonished ears.

"You need n't try to play off Dobell or Mitchell on *me*—you hear! Much *you* know of either, don't you? Look at that copy. If Johnny couldn't do better than that, I'd lick him. Of course it's the pen—it ain't your stodgy fingers—oh, no! P'r'aps you'd like to hev a few more boxes

o' quills and gold pens and Gillott's best thrown in, for two bits a lesson? I tell you what! I'll throw up the contract in another minit! There goes another quill busted! Look here, what *you* want ain't a pen, but a clothes-pin and a split nail! That'll about jibe with your dilikit gait."

The master at once stepped to the window and, unobserved, took a quick survey of the interior. Following some ingenious idea of his own regarding fitness, the beautiful Filgee had induced Uncle Ben to seat himself on the floor before one of the smallest desks, presumably his brother's, in an attitude which, while it certainly gave him considerable elbow-room for those contortions common to immature penmanship, offered his youthful instructor a superior eminence, from which he hovered, occasionally swooping down upon his grown-up pupil like a mischievous but graceful jay. But Mr. Ford's most distinct impression was that, far from resenting the derogatory position and the abuse that accompanied it, Uncle Ben not only beamed upon his persecutor with unquenchable good humor, but with undisguised admiration, and showed not the slightest inclination to accept his proposed resignation.

"Go slow, Roop," he said cheerfully. "You was onct a boy yourself. Nat'rally I kalkilate to stand all the damages. You've got ter waste some powder over a blast like this yer, way down to the bed rock. Next time I'll bring my own pens."

"Do. Some from the Dobell school you uster go to," suggested the darkly ironical Rupert. "They was iron-clad injin-rubber, war n't they?"

"Never you mind wot they were," said Uncle Ben good-humoredly. "Look at that string of 'C's' in that line. There's nothing mean about *them*."

He put his pen between his teeth, raised himself slowly on his legs, and shading his eyes with his hand from the severe perspective of six feet, gazed admiringly down upon his work. Rupert, with his hands in his pockets and his back to the window, cynically assisted at the inspection.

"Wot 's that sick worm at the bottom of the page?" he asked.

"Wot might you think it wos?" said Uncle Ben beamingly.

"Looks like one o' them snake roots you dig up with a little mud stuck to it," returned Rupert critically.

“That’s my name.”

They both stood looking at it with their heads very much on one side. “It ain’t so bad as the rest you’ve done. It *might* be your name. That ez, it don’t look like anythin’ else,” suggested Rupert, struck with a new idea that it was perhaps more professional occasionally to encourage his pupil. “You might get on in course o’ time. But what are you doin’ all this for?” he asked suddenly.

“Doin’ what?”

“This yer comin’ to school when you ain’t sent, and you ain’t got no call to go — you, a grown-up man!”

The color deepened in Uncle Ben’s face to the back of his ears. “Wot would you giv’ to know, Roop? S’pose I reckoned some day to make a strike and sorter drop inter saciety easy — eh? S’pose I wanted to be ready to keep up my end with the other fellers, when the time kem? To be able to sling po’try and read novels and sich — eh?”

An expression of infinite and unutterable scorn dawned in the eyes of Rupert. “You do? Well,” he repeated with slow and cutting deliberation, “I’ll tell you what you’re

comin' here for, and the only thing that makes you come !”

“ What ? ”

“ It 's — some — girl ! ”

Uncle Ben broke into a boisterous laugh that made the roof shake, stamping about and slapping his legs till the crazy floor trembled. But at that moment the master stepped to the porch and made a quiet but discomposing entrance.

CHAPTER IV.

THE return of Miss Cressida McKinstry to Indian Spring and her interrupted studies was an event whose effects were not entirely confined to the school. The broken engagement itself seemed of little moment in the general estimation compared to her resumption of her old footing as a scholar. A few ill-natured elders of her own sex, and naturally exempt from the discriminating retort of Mr. McKinstry's "shot-gun," alleged that the Seminary at Sacramento had declined to receive her, but the majority accepted her return with local pride as a practical compliment to the educational facilities of Indian Spring. The Tuolumne "Star," with a breadth and eloquence touchingly disproportionate to its actual size and quality of type and paper, referred to the possible "growth of a grove of Academus at Indian Spring, under whose cloistered boughs future sages and statesmen were now meditating," in a way that made

the master feel exceedingly uncomfortable. For some days the trail between the McKinstrys' ranch and the school-house was lightly patrolled by reliefs of susceptible young men, to whom the enfranchised Cressida, relieved from the dangerous supervision of the Davis-McKinstry clique, was an object of ambitious admiration. The young girl herself, who, in spite of the master's annoyance, seemed to be following some conscientious duty in consecutively arraying herself in the different dresses she had bought, however she may have tantalized her admirers by this revelation of bridal finery, did not venture to bring them near the limits of the play-ground. It struck the master with some surprise that Indian Spring did not seem to trouble itself in regard to his own privileged relations with its rustic enchantress; the young men clearly were not jealous of him; no matron had suggested any indecorum in a young girl of Cressy's years and antecedents being intrusted to the teachings of a young man scarcely her senior. Notwithstanding the attitude which Mr. Ford had been pleased to assume towards her, this implied compliment to his supposed monastic vocations af-

fecting him almost as uncomfortably as the "Star's" extravagant eulogium. He was obliged to recall certain foolish experiences of his own to enable him to rise superior to this presumption of his asceticism.

In pursuance of his promise to McKinstry, he had procured a few elementary books of study suitable to Cressy's new position, without, however, taking her out of the smaller classes or the discipline of the school. In a few weeks he was enabled to further improve her attitude by making her a "monitor" over the smaller girls, thereby dividing certain functions with Rupert Filgee, whose ministrations to the deceitful and "silly" sex had been characterized by perhaps more vigilant scorn and disparagement than was necessary. Cressy had accepted it as she had accepted her new studies, with an indolent good-humor, and at times a frankly supreme ignorance of their abstract or moral purpose that was discouraging. "What's the good of that?" she would ask, lifting her eyes abruptly to the master. Mr. Ford, somewhat embarrassed by her look, which always, sooner or later, frankly confessed itself an excuse for a perfectly irrelevant examination of his features in detail, would

end in giving her some severely practical answer. Yet, if the subject appealed to any particular idiosyncrasy of her own, she would speedily master the study. A passing predilection for botany was provoked by a single incident. The master deeming this study a harmless young-lady-like occupation, had one day introduced the topic at recess, and was met by the usual answer. "But suppose," he continued artfully, "somebody sent you anonymously some flowers."

"Her bo!" suggested Johnny Filgee hoarsely, with bold bad recklessness. Ignoring the remark and the kick with which Rupert had resented it on the person of his brother, the master continued:

"And if you could n't find out who sent them, you would want at least to know what they were and where they grew."

"Ef they grew anywhere 'bout yer we could tell her that," said a chorus of small voices.

The master hesitated. He was conscious of being on delicate ground. He was surrounded by a dozen pairs of little keen eyes from whom Nature had never yet succeeded in hiding her secrets — eyes that had waited for and knew the coming up of the earliest

flowers; little fingers that had never turned the pages of a text-book, but knew where to scrape away the dead leaves above the first anemone, or had groped painfully among the lifeless branches in forgotten hollows for the shy dog-rose; unguided little feet that had instinctively made their way to remote southern slopes for the first *mariposas*, or had unerringly threaded the *tule*-hidden banks of the river for flower-de-luce. Convinced that he could not hold his own on their level, he shamelessly struck at once above it.

“Suppose that one of those flowers,” he continued, “was not like the rest; that its stalks and leaves, instead of being green and soft, were white and stringy like flannel as if to protect it from cold, would n’t it be nice to be able to say at once that it had lived only in the snow, and that some one must have gone all that way up there above the snow line to pick it?” The children, taken aback by this unfair introduction of a floral stranger, were silent. Cressy thoughtfully accepted botany on those possibilities. A week later she laid on the master’s desk a limp-looking plant with a stalk like heavy frayed worsted yarn. “It ain’t much to look at after all, is it?” she said. “I reckon

I could cut a better one with scissors out of an old cloth jacket of mine."

"And you found it here?" asked the master in surprise.

"I got Masters to look for it when he was on the Summit. I described it to him. I did n't allow he had the gumption to get it. But he did."

Although botany languished slightly after this vicarious effort, it kept Cressy in fresh bouquets, and extending its gentle influence to her friends and acquaintances became slightly confounded with horticulture, led to the planting of one or two gardens, and was accepted in school as an implied concession to berries, apples, and nuts. In reading and writing Cressy greatly improved, with a marked decrease in grammatical solecisms, although she still retained certain characteristic words, and always her own slow Southwestern, half musical intonation. This languid deliberation was particularly noticeable in her reading aloud, and gave the studied and measured rhetoric a charm of which her careless colloquial speech was incapable. Even the "Fifth Reader," with its imposing passages from the English classics carefully selected with a view of paralyzing small,

hesitating, or hurried voices, in Cressy's hands became no longer an unintelligible incantation. She had quietly mastered the difficulties of pronunciation by some instinctive sense of euphony if not of comprehension. The master with his eyes closed hardly recognized his pupil. Whether or not she understood what she read he hesitated to inquire; no doubt, as with her other studies, she knew what attracted her. Rupert Filgee, a sympathetic if not always a correct reader, who boldly took four and five syllabled fences flying only to come to grief perhaps in the ditch of some rhetorical pause beyond, alone expressed his scorn of her performance. Octavia Dean, torn between her hopeless affection for this beautiful but inaccessible boy, and her soul-friendship for this bigger but many-frocked girl, studied the master's face with watchful anxiety.

It is needless to say that Hiram McKinstry was, in the intervals of stake-driving and stock-hunting, heavily contented with this latest evidence of his daughter's progress. He even intimated to the master that her reading being an accomplishment that could be exercised at home was conducive to that "kam" in which he was so deficient. It

was also rumored that Cressy's oral rendering of Addison's "Reflections in Westminster Abbey" and Burke's "Indictment of Warren Hastings," had beguiled him one evening from improving an opportunity to "plug" one of Harrison's boundary "raiders."

The master shared in Cressy's glory in the public eye. But although Mrs. McKinstry did not materially change her attitude of tolerant good-nature towards him, he was painfully conscious that she looked upon her daughter's studies and her husband's interests in them as a weakness that might in course of time produce infirmity of homicidal purpose and become enervating of eye and trigger-finger. And when Mr. McKinstry got himself appointed as school-trustee, and was thereby obliged to mingle with certain Eastern settlers, — colleagues on the Board, — this possible weakening of the old sharply drawn sectional line between "Yanks" and themselves gave her grave doubts of Hiram's physical stamina.

"The old man's worrits hev sorter shook out a little of his sand," she had explained. On those evenings when he attended the Board, she sought higher consolation in

prayer meeting at the Southern Baptist Church, in whose exercises her Northern and Eastern neighbors, thinly disguised as "Baal" and "Astaroth," were generally overthrown and their temples made desolate.

If Uncle Ben's progress was slower, it was no less satisfactory. Without imagination and even without enthusiasm, he kept on with a dull laborious persistency. When the irascible impatience of Rupert Filgee at last succumbed to the obdurate slowness of his pupil, the master himself, touched by Uncle Ben's perspiring forehead and perplexed eyebrows, often devoted the rest of the afternoon to a gentle elucidation of the mysteries before him, setting copies for his heavy hand, or even guiding it with his own, like a child's, across the paper. At times the appalling uselessness of Uncle Ben's endeavors reminded him of Rupert's taunting charge. Was he really doing this from a genuine thirst for knowledge? It was inconsistent with all that Indian Spring knew of his antecedents and his present ambitions; he was a simple miner without scientific or technical knowledge; his already slight acquaintance with arithmetic and the scrawl

that served for his signature were more than sufficient for his needs. Yet it was with this latter sign-manual that he seemed to take infinite pains. The master, one afternoon, thought fit to correct the apparent vanity of this performance.

"If you took as much care in trying to form your letters according to copy, you'd do better. Your signature is fair enough as it is."

"But it don't look right, Mr. Ford," said Uncle Ben, eying it distrustfully; "somehow it ain't all there."

"Why, certainly it is. Look, D A B N E Y — not very plain, it's true, but there are all the letters."

"That's just it, Mr. Ford; them *ain't* all the letters that *orter* be there. I've allowed to write it D A B N E Y to save time and ink, but it *orter* read D A U B I G N Y," said Uncle Ben, with painful distinctness.

"But that spells d'Aubigny!"

"It are."

"Is that your name?"

"I reckon."

The master looked at Uncle Ben doubtfully. Was this only another form of the Dobell illusion? "Was your father a Frenchman?" he asked finally.

Uncle Ben paused as if to recall the trifling circumstances of his father's nationality. "No."

"Your grandfather?"

"I reckon not. At least ye could n't prove it by me."

"Was your father or grandfather a *voyageur* or trapper, or Canadian?"

"They were from Pike County, Miz-zoori."

The master regarded Uncle Ben still dubiously. "But you call yourself Dabney. What makes you think your real name is d'Aubigny?"

"That's the way it uster be writ in letters to me in the States. Hold on. I'll show ye." He deliberately began to feel in his pockets, finally extracting his old purse from which he produced a crumpled envelope, and carefully smoothing it out, compared it with his signature.

"Thar, you see. It's the same — d'Aubigny."

The master hesitated. After all, it was not impossible. He recalled other instances of the singular transformation of names in the Californian emigration. Yet he could not help saying, "Then you concluded

d'Aubigny was a better name than Dabney?"

"Do *you* think it's better?"

"Women might. I dare say your wife would prefer to be called Mrs. d'Aubigny rather than Dabney."

The chance shot told. Uncle Ben suddenly flushed to his ears.

"I didn't think o' that," he said hurriedly. "I had another idee. I reckoned that on the matter o' holdin' property and passin' in money it would be better to hev your name put on the square, and to sorter go down to bed rock for it, eh? If I wanted to take a hand in them lots or Ditch shares, for instance — it would be only law to hev it made out in the name o' d'Aubigny."

Mr. Ford listened with a certain impatient contempt. It was bad enough for Uncle Ben to have exposed his weakness in inventing fictions about his early education, but to invest himself now with a contingency of capital for the sake of another childish vanity, was pitiable as it was preposterous. There was no doubt that he had lied about his school experiences; it was barely probable that his name was really d'Aubigny, and it was quite consistent with all this — even

setting apart the fact that he was perfectly well known to be only a poor miner — that he should lie again. Like most logical reasoners Mr. Ford forgot that humanity might be illogical and inconsistent without being insincere. He turned away without speaking as if indicating a wish to hear no more.

“Some o’ these days,” said Uncle Ben, with dull persistency, “I’ll tell ye suthen’.”

“I’d advise you just now to drop it and stick to your lessons,” said the master sharply.

“That’s so,” said Uncle Ben hurriedly, hiding himself as it were in an all-encompassing blush. “In course lessons first, boys, that’s the motto.” He again took up his pen and assumed his old laborious attitude. But after a few moments it became evident that either the master’s curt dismissal of his subject or his own preoccupation with it, had somewhat unsettled him. He cleaned his pen obtrusively, going to the window for a better light, and whistling from time to time with a demonstrative carelessness and a depressing gayety. He once broke into a murmuring, meditative chant evidently referring to the previous conversation, in its — “That’s so — Yer we go — Lessons

the first, boys, Yo, heave O." The rollicking marine character of this refrain, despite its utter incongruousness, apparently struck him favorably, for he repeated it softly, occasionally glancing behind him at the master who was coldly absorbed at his desk. Presently he arose, carefully put his books away, symmetrically piling them in a pyramid beside Mr. Ford's motionless elbow, and then lifting his feet with high but gentle steps went to the peg where his coat and hat were hanging. As he was about to put them on he appeared suddenly struck with a sense of indecorousness in dressing himself in the school, and taking them on his arm to the porch resumed them outside. Then saying, "I clean disremembered I'd got to see a man. So long, till to-morrow," he disappeared whistling softly.

The old woodland hush fell back upon the school. It seemed very quiet and empty. A faint sense of remorse stole over the master. Yet he remembered that Uncle Ben had accepted without reproach and as a good joke much more direct accusations from Rupert Filgee, and that he himself had acted from a conscientious sense of duty towards the man. But a conscientious sense of duty to

inflict pain upon a fellow-mortal for his own good does not always bring perfect serenity to the inflicter — possibly because, in the defective machinery of human compensation, pain is the only quality that is apt to appear in the illustration. Mr. Ford felt uncomfortable, and being so, was naturally vexed at the innocent cause. Why should Uncle Ben be offended because he had simply declined to follow his weak fabrications any further? This was his return for having tolerated it at first! It would be a lesson to him henceforth. Nevertheless he got up and went to the door. The figure of Uncle Ben was already indistinct among the leaves, but from the motion of his shoulders he seemed to be still stepping high and softly as if not yet clear of insecure and engulfing ground.

The silence still continuing, the master began mechanically to look over the desks for forgotten or mislaid articles, and to rearrange the pupils' books and copies. A few heartsease gathered by the devoted Octavia Dean, neatly tied with a black thread and regularly left in the inkstand cavity of Rupert's desk, were still lying on the floor where they had been always hurled with

equal regularity by that disdainful Adonis. Picking up a slate from under a bench, his attention was attracted by a forgotten cartoon on the reverse side. Mr. Ford at once recognized it as the work of that youthful but eminent caricaturist, Johnny Filgee. Broad in treatment, comprehensive in subject, liberal in detail and slate-pencil — it represented Uncle Ben lying on the floor with a book in his hand, tyrannized over by Rupert Filgee and regarded in a striking profile of two features by Cressy McKinstry. The daring realism of introducing the names of each character on their legs — perhaps ideally enlarged for that purpose — left no doubt of their identity. Equally daring but no less effective was the rendering of a limited but dramatic conversation between the parties by the aid of emotional balloons attached to their mouths like a visible gulp bearing the respective legends: “I luv you,” “O my,” and “You git!”

The master was for a moment startled at this unlooked-for but graphic testimony to the fact that Uncle Ben’s visits to the school were not only known but commented upon. The small eyes of those youthful observers had been keener than his own. He had

again been stupidly deceived, in spite of his efforts. Love, albeit deficient in features and wearing an improperly short bell-shaped frock, had boldly reëntered the peaceful school, and disturbing complications on abnormal legs were following at its heels.

CHAPTER V.

WHILE this simple pastoral life was centred around the school-house in the clearing, broken only by an occasional warning pistol-shot in the direction of the Harrison-McKinstry boundaries, the more business part of Indian Spring was overtaken by one of those spasms of enterprise peculiar to all Californian mining settlements. The opening of the Eureka Ditch and the extension of stage-coach communication from Big Bluff were events of no small importance, and were celebrated on the same day. The double occasion overtaxing even the fluent rhetoric of the editor of the "Star" left him struggling in the metaphorical difficulties of a Pactolian Spring, which he had rashly turned into the Ditch, and obliged him to transfer the onerous duty of writing the editorial on the Big Bluff Extension to the hands of the Honorable Abner Dean, Assemblyman from Angel's. The loss of the Honorable Mr. Dean's right eye in an early pioneer

fracas did not prevent him from looking into the dim vista of the future and discovering with that single unaided optic enough to fill three columns of the "Star." "It is not too extravagant to say," he remarked with charming deprecation, "that Indian Spring, through its own perfectly organized system of inland transportation, the confluence of its North Fork with the Sacramento River, and their combined effluence into the illimitable Pacific, is thus put not only into direct communication with far Cathay but even remoter Antipodean markets. The citizen of Indian Spring taking the 9 A. M. Pioneer Coach and arriving at Big Bluff at 2.40 is enabled to connect with the through express to Sacramento the same evening, reaching San Francisco per the Steam Navigation Company's palatial steamers in time to take the Pacific Mail Steamer to Yokohama on the following day at 3.30 P. M." Although no citizen of Indian Spring appeared to avail himself of this admirable opportunity, nor did it appear at all likely that any would, everybody vaguely felt that an inestimable boon lay in the suggestion, and even the master professionally intrusting the reading aloud of the editorial to Rupert Filgee with

ulterior designs of practice in the pronunciation of five-syllable words, was somewhat affected by it. Johnny Filgee and Jimmy Snyder accepting it as a mysterious something that made Desert Islands accessible at a moment's notice and a trifling outlay, were round-eyed and attentive. And the culminating information from the master that this event would be commemorated by a half-holiday, combined to make the occasion as exciting to the simple school-house in the clearing as it was to the gilded saloon in the main street.

And so the momentous day arrived, with its two new coaches from Big Bluff containing the specially invited speakers — always specially invited to those occasions, and yet strangely enough never before feeling the extreme “importance and privilege” of it as they did then. Then there were the firing of two anvils, the strains of a brass band, the hoisting of a new flag on the liberty-pole, and later the ceremony of the Ditch opening, when a distinguished speaker in a most unworkman-like tall hat, black frock coat, and white cravat, which gave him the general air of a festive grave-digger, took a spade from the hands of an apparently hilarious chief

mourner and threw out the first sods. There were anvils, brass bands, and a "collation" at the hotel. But everywhere — overriding the most extravagant expectation and even the laughter it provoked — the spirit of indomitable youth and resistless enterprise intoxicated the air. It was the spirit that had made California possible; that had sown a thousand such ventures broadcast through its wilderness; that had enabled the sower to stand half-humorously among his scant or ruined harvests without fear and without repining, and turn his undaunted and ever hopeful face to further fields. What mattered it that Indian Spring had always before its eyes the abandoned trenches and ruined outworks of its earlier pioneers? What mattered it that the eloquent eulogist of the Eureka Ditch had but a few years before as prodigally scattered his adjectives and his fortune on the useless tunnel that confronted him on the opposite side of the river? The sublime forgetfulness of youth ignored its warning or recognized it as a joke. The master, fresh from his little flock and prematurely aged by their contact, felt a stirring of something like envy as he wandered among these scarcely older enthusiasts.

Especially memorable was the exciting day to Johnny Filgee, not only for the delightfully bewildering clamor of the brass band, in which, between the trombone and the bass drum, he had got inextricably mixed; not only for the half-frightening explosions of the anvils and the maddening smell of the gunpowder which had exalted his infant soul to sudden and irrelevant whoopings, but for a singular occurrence that whetted his always keen perceptions. Having been shamelessly abandoned on the veranda of the Eureka Hotel while his brother Rupert paid bashful court to the pretty proprietress by assisting her in her duties, Johnny gave himself up to unlimited observation. The rosettes of the six horses, the new harness, the length of the driver's whiplash, his enormous buckskin gloves and the way he held his reins; the fascinating odor of shining varnish on the coach, the gold-headed cane of the Honorable Abner Dean: all these were stored away in the secret recesses of Johnny's memory, even as the unconsidered trifles he had picked up *en route* were distending his capacious pockets. But when a young man had alighted from the second or "Truly" coach among the *real* passengers, and strolled carelessly

and easily in the veranda as if the novelty and the occasion were nothing to him, Johnny, with a gulp of satisfaction, knew that he had seen a prince! Beautifully dressed in a white duck suit, with a diamond ring on his finger, a gold chain swinging from his fob, and a Panama hat with a broad black ribbon jauntily resting on his curled and scented hair, Johnny's eyes had never rested on a more resplendent vision. He was more romantic than Yuba Bill, more imposing and less impossible than the Honorable Abner Dean, more eloquent than the master — far more beautiful than any colored print that he had ever seen. Had he brushed him in passing Johnny would have felt a thrill; had he spoken to him he knew he would have been speechless to reply. Judge then of his utter stupefaction when he saw Uncle Ben — actually Uncle Ben! — approach this paragon of perfection, albeit with some embarrassment, and after a word or two of unintelligible conversation walk away with him! Need it be wondered that Johnny, forgetful at once of his brother, the horses, and even the collation with its possible "goodies," instantly followed.

The two men turned into the side street,

which, after a few hundred yards, opened upon the deserted mining flat, crossed and broken by the burrows and mounds made by the forgotten engines of the early gold-seekers. Johnny, at times hidden by these irregularities, kept closely in their rear, sauntering whenever he came within the range of their eyes in that sidelong, spasmodic and generally diagonal fashion peculiar to small boys, but ready at any moment to assume utter unconsciousness and the appearance of going somewhere else or of searching for something on the ground. In this way appearing, if noticed at all, each time in some different position to the right or left of them, Johnny followed them to the fringe of woodland which enabled him to draw closer to their heels.

Utterly oblivious of this artistic "shadowing" in the insignificant person of the small boy who once or twice even crossed their path with affected timidity, they continued an apparently confidential previous interview. The words "stocks" and "shares" were alone intelligible. Johnny had heard them during the day, but he was struck by the fact that Uncle Ben seemed to be seeking information from the paragon and was

perfectly submissive and humble. But the boy was considerably mystified when after a tramp of half an hour they arrived upon the debatable ground of the Harrison-McKinstry boundary. Having been especially warned never to go there, Johnny as a matter of course was perfectly familiar with it. But what was the incomprehensible stranger doing there? Was he brought by Uncle Ben with a view of paralyzing both of the combatants with the spectacle of his perfections? Was he a youthful sheriff, a young judge, or maybe the son of the Governor of California? Or was it that Uncle Ben was "silly" and didn't know the locality? Here was an opportunity for him, Johnny, to introduce himself, and explain and even magnify the danger, with perhaps a slight allusion to his own fearless familiarity with it. Unfortunately, as he was making up his small mind behind a tree, the paragon turned and with the easy disdain that so well became him, said :

"Well, *I* would n't offer a dollar an acre for the whole ranch. But if *you* choose to give a fancy price — that's your lookout."

To Johnny's already prejudiced mind, Uncle Ben received this just contempt sub-

missively, as he ought, but nevertheless he muttered something "silly" in reply, which Johnny was really too disgusted to listen to. Ought he not to step forward and inform the paragon that he was wasting his time on a man who could n't even spell "ba-ker," and who was taught his letters by his, Johnny's, brother?

The paragon continued:

"And of course you know that merely your buying the title to the land don't give you possession. You'll have to fight these squatters and jumpers just the same. It'll be three instead of two fighting — that's all!"

Uncle Ben's imbecile reply did not trouble Johnny. He had ears now only for the superior intellect before him. *It* continued coolly:

"Now let's take a look at that yield of yours. I haven't much time to give you, as I expect some men to be looking for me here — and I suppose you want this thing still kept a secret. I don't see how you've managed to do it so far. Is your claim near? You live on it — I think you said?"

But that the little listener was so preoccupied with the stranger, this suggestion of

Uncle Ben's having a claim worth the attention of that distinguished presence would have set him thinking; the little that he understood he set down to Uncle Ben's "gas-sin'." As the two men moved forward again, he followed them until Uncle Ben's house was reached.

It was a rude shanty of boards and rough boulders, half burrowing in one of the largest mounds of earth and gravel, which had once represented the tailings or refuse of the abandoned Indian Spring Placer. In fact it was casually alleged by some that Uncle Ben eked out the scanty "grub wages," he made by actual mining, in reworking and sifting the tailings at odd times — a degrading work hitherto practised only by Chinese, and unworthy the Caucasian ambition. The mining code of honor held that a man might accept the smallest results of his daily labor, as long as he was sustained by the prospect of a larger "strike," but condemned his contentment with a modest certainty. Nevertheless a little of this suspicion encompassed his dwelling and contributed to its loneliness, even as a long ditch, the former tail-race of the claim, separated him from his neighbors. Prudently halting at the

edge of the wood, Johnny saw his resplendent vision cross the strip of barren flat, and enter the cabin with Uncle Ben like any other mortal. He sat down on a stump and awaited its return, which he fondly hoped might be alone! At the end of half an hour he made a short excursion to examine the condition of a blackberry bramble, and returned to his post of observation. But there was neither sound nor motion in the direction of the cabin. When another ten minutes had elapsed, the door opened and to Johnny's intense discomfiture, Uncle Ben appeared alone and walked leisurely towards the woods. Burning with anxiety Johnny threw himself in Uncle Ben's way. But here occurred one of those surprising inconsistencies known only to children. As Uncle Ben turned his small gray eyes upon him in a half astonished, half questioning manner, the potent spirit of childish secretiveness suddenly took possession of the boy. Wild horses could not now have torn from him that question which only a moment before was on his lips.

"Hullo, Johnny! What are ye doin' here?" said Uncle Ben kindly.

"Nothin'." After a pause, in which he

walked all round Uncle Ben's large figure, gazing up at him as if he were a monument, he added, "Huntin' blackberrieth."

"Why ain't you over at the collation?"

"Ruperth there," he answered promptly.

The idea of being thus vicariously present in the person of his brother seemed a sufficient excuse. He leap-frogged over the stump on which he had been sitting as an easy unembarrassing pause for the next question. But Uncle Ben was apparently perfectly satisfied with Johnny's reply, and nodding to him, walked away.

When his figure had disappeared in the bushes, Johnny cautiously approached the cabin. At a certain distance he picked up a stone and threw it against the door, immediately taking to his heels and the friendly copse again. No one appearing he repeated the experiment twice and even thrice with a larger stone and at a nearer distance. Then he boldly skirted the cabin and dropped into the race-way at its side. Following it a few hundred yards he came upon a long disused shaft opening into it, which had been covered with a rough trap of old planks, as if to protect incautious wayfarers from falling in. Here a sudden and inexplicable fear over-

took Johnny, and he ran away. When he reached the hotel, almost the first sight that met his astounded eyes was the spectacle of the paragon, apparently still in undisturbed possession of all his perfections — driving coolly off in a buggy with a fresh companion.

Meantime Mr. Ford, however touched by the sentimental significance of the celebration, became slightly wearied of its details. As his own room in the Eureka Hotel was actually thrilled by the brass band without and the eloquence of speakers below, and had become redolent of gunpowder and champagne exploded around it, he determined to return to the school-house and avail himself of its woodland quiet to write a few letters.

The change was grateful, the distant murmur of the excited settlement came only as the soothing sound of wind among the leaves. The pure air of the pines that filled every cranny of the quiet school-room, and seemed to disperse all taint of human tenancy, made the far-off celebrations as unreal as a dream. The only reality of his life was here.

He took from his pocket a few letters —

one of which was worn and soiled with frequent handling. He re-read it in a half methodical, half patient way, as if he were waiting for some revelation it inspired, which was slow that afternoon in coming. At other times it had called up a youthful enthusiasm which was wont to transfigure his grave and prematurely reserved face with a new expression. To-day the revelation and expression were both wanting. He put the letter back with a slight sigh, that sounded so preposterous in the silent room that he could not forego an embarrassed smile. But the next moment he set himself seriously to work on his correspondence.

Presently he stopped; once or twice he had been overtaken by a vague undefinable sense of pleasure, even to the dreamy halting of his pen. It was a sensation in no way connected with the subject of his correspondence, or even his previous reflections — it was partly physical, and yet it was in some sense suggestive. It must be the intoxicating effect of the woodland air. He even fancied he had noticed it before, at the same hour when the sun was declining and the fresh odors of the undergrowth were rising. It certainly was a perfume. He raised his

eyes. There lay the cause on the desk before him — a little nosegay of wild Californian myrtle encircling a rose-bud which had escaped his notice.

There was nothing unusual in the circumstance. The children were in the habit of making their offerings generally without particular reference to time or occasion, and it might have been overlooked by him during school-hours. He felt a pity for the forgotten posy already beginning to grow limp in its neglected solitude. He remembered that in some folk-lore of the children's, perhaps a tradition of the old association of the myrtle with Venus, it was believed to be emblematic of the affections. He remembered also that he had even told them of this probable origin of their superstition. He was still holding it in his hand when he was conscious of a silken sensation that sent a magnetic thrill through his fingers. Looking at it more closely he saw that the sprigs were bound together, not by thread or ribbon, but by long filaments of soft brown hair tightly wound around them. He unwound a single hair and held it to the light. Its length, color, texture, and above all a certain inexplicable instinct, told him it was Cressy Mc-

Kinstry's. He laid it down quickly, as if he had, in that act, familiarly touched her person.

He finished his letter, but presently found himself again looking at the myrtle and thinking about it. From the position in which it had been placed it was evidently intended for him ; the fancy of binding it with hair was also intentional and not a necessity, as he knew his feminine scholars were usually well provided with bits of thread, silk, or ribbon. If it had been some new absurdity of childish fashion introduced in the school, he would have noticed it ere this. For it was this obtrusion of a personality that vaguely troubled him. He remembered Cressy's hair ; it was certainly very beautiful, in spite of her occasional vagaries of *coiffure*. He recalled how, one afternoon, it had come down when she was romping with Octavia in the play-ground, and was surprised to find what a vivid picture he retained of her lingering in the porch to put it up ; her rounded arms held above her head, her pretty shoulders, full throat, and glowing face thrown back, and a wisp of the very hair between her white teeth ! He began another letter.

When it was finished the shadow of the pine-branch before the window, thrown by the nearly level sun across his paper, had begun slowly to reach the opposite wall. He put his work away, lingered for a moment in hesitation over the myrtle sprays, and then locked them in his desk with an odd feeling that he had secured in some vague way a hold upon Cressy's future vagaries ; then reflecting that Uncle Ben, whom he had seen in town, would probably keep holiday with the others, he resolved to wait no longer, but strolled back to the hotel. The act however had not recalled Uncle Ben to him by any association of ideas, for since his discovery of Johnny Filgee's caricature he had failed to detect anything to corroborate the caricaturist's satire, and had dismissed the subject from his mind.

On entering his room at the hotel he found Rupert Filgee standing moodily by the window, while his brother Johnny, overcome by a repletion of excitement and collation, was asleep on the single arm-chair. Their presence was not unusual, as Mr. Ford, touched by the loneliness of these motherless boys, had often invited them to come to his rooms to look over his books and illustrated papers.

"Well?" he said cheerfully.

Rupert did not reply or change his position. Mr. Ford, glancing at him sharply, saw a familiar angry light in the boy's beautiful eyes, slightly dimmed by a tear. Laying his hand gently on Rupert's shoulder he said, "What's the matter, Rupert?"

"Nothin'," said the boy doggedly, with his eyes still fixed on the pane.

"Has — has — Mrs. Tripp" (the fair proprietress) "been unkind?" he went on lightly.

No reply.

"You know, Rupe," continued Mr. Ford demurely, "she must show *some* reserve before company — like to-day. It won't do to make a scandal."

Rupert maintained an indignant silence. But the dimple (which he usually despised as a feminine blot) on the cheek nearer the master became slightly accented. Only for a moment; the dark eyes clouded again.

"I wish I was dead, Mr. Ford."

"Hallo!"

"Or — doin' suthin'."

"That's better. What do you want to do?"

"To work — make a livin' myself. Quit

toten' wood and water at home ; quit cookin' and makin' beds, like a yaller Chinaman ; quit nussin' babies and dressin' 'em and undressin' 'em, like a girl. Look at *him* now," pointing to the sweetly unconscious Johnny, "look at him there. Do you know what that means ? It means I 've got to pack him home through the town jist ez he is thar, and then make a fire and bile his food for him, and wash him and undress him and put him to bed, and 'Now I lay me down to sleep' him, and tuck him up ; and Dad all the while 'scootin' round town with other idjits, jawin' about 'progress' and the 'future of Injin Spring.' Much future we've got over our own house, Mr. Ford. Much future he's got laid up for me !"

The master, to whom those occasional outbreaks from Rupert were not unfamiliar, smiled, albeit with serious eyes that belied his lips, and consoled the boy as he had often done before. But he was anxious to know the cause of this recent attack and its probable relations to the fascinating Mrs. Tripp.

"I thought we talked all that over some time ago, Rupe. In a few months you'll be able to leave school, and I'll advise your

father about putting you into something to give you a hance for yourself. Patience, old fellow; 'ou're doing very well. Consider — there's your pupil, Uncle Ben."

"Oh, yes! That's another big baby to tot round in school when I ain't niggerin' at home."

"And I don't see exactly what else you could do at Indian Spring," continued Mr. Ford.

"No," said Rupert gloomily, "but I could get away to Sacramento. Yuba Bill says they take boys no bigger nor me in thar express offices or banks — and in a year or two they're as good ez anybody and get paid as big. Why, there was a fellow here, just now, no older than you, Mr. Ford, and not half your learnin', and he dressed to death with jewelry, and everybody bowin' and scrapin' to him, that it was perfectly sickenin'."

Mr. Ford lifted his eyebrows. "Oh, you mean the young man of Benham and Co., who was talking to Mrs. Tripp?" he said.

A quick flush of angry consciousness crossed Rupert's face. "Maybe; he has just cheek enough for anythin'."

"And you want to be like him?" said Mr. Ford.

"You know what I mean, Mr. Ford. Not *like* him. Why *you're* as good as he is, any day," continued Rupert with relentless *naïveté*; "but if a jay-bird like that can get on, why could n't I?"

There was no doubt that the master here pointed out the defectiveness of Rupert's logic and the beneficence of patience and study, as became their relations of master and pupil, but with the addition of a certain fellow sympathy and some amusing recital of his own boyish experiences, that had the effect of calling Rupert's dimples into action again. At the end of half an hour the boy had become quite tractable, and, getting ready to depart, approached his sleeping brother with something like resignation. But Johnny's nap seemed to have had the effect of transforming him into an inert jelly-like mass. It required the joint exertions of both the master and Rupert to transfer him bodily into the latter's arms, where, with a single limp elbow encircling his brother's neck, he lay with his unfinished slumber still visibly distending his cheeks, his eyelids, and even lifting his curls from his moist forehead. The master bade Rupert "good-night," and re-

turned to his room as the boy descended the stairs with his burden.

But here Providence, with, I fear, its occasional disregard of mere human morality, rewarded Rupert after his own foolish desires. Mrs. Tripp was at the foot of the stairs as Rupert came slowly down. He saw her, and was covered with shame; she saw him and his burden, and was touched with kindness. Whether or not she was also mischievously aware of Rupert's admiration, and was not altogether displeased with it, I cannot say. In a voice that thrilled him, she said: —

“What! Rupert, are you going so soon?”

“Yes, ma'am — on account of Johnny.”

“But let me take him — I can keep him here to-night.”

It was a great temptation, but Rupert had strength to refuse, albeit with his hat pulled over his downcast eyes.

“Poor dear, how tired he looks.”

She approached her still fresh and pretty face close to Rupert and laid her lips on Johnny's cheek. Then she lifted her audacious eyes to his brother, and pushing back his well-worn chip hat from his clustering curls, she kissed him squarely on the forehead.

“Good-night, dear.”

The boy stumbled, and then staggered blindly forward into the outer darkness. But with a gentleman's delicacy he turned almost instantly into a side street, as if to keep this consecration of himself from vulgar eyes. The path he had chosen was rough and weary, the night was dark, and Johnny was ridiculously heavy, but he kept steadily on, the woman's kiss in the fancy of the foolish boy shining on his forehead and lighting him onward like a star.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN the door closed on Rupert the master pulled down the blind, and, trimming his lamp, tried to compose himself by reading. Outside, the "Great Day for Indian Spring" was slowly evaporating in pale mists from the river, and the celebration itself spasmodically taking flight here and there in Roman candles and rockets. An occasional outbreak from revellers in the bar-room below, a stumbling straggler along the planked sidewalk before the hotel, only seemed to intensify the rustic stillness. For the future of Indian Spring was still so remote that Nature insensibly re-invested its boundaries on the slightest relaxation of civic influence, and Mr. Ford lifted his head from the glowing columns of the "Star" to listen to the far-off yelp of a coyote on the opposite shore.

He was also conscious of the recurrence of that vague, pleasurable recollection, so indefinite that, when he sought to identify

it with anything—even the finding of the myrtle sprays on his desk—it evaded him. He tried to work, with the same interruption. Then an uneasy sensation that he had not been sufficiently kind to Rupert in his foolish love-troubles remorsefully seized him. A half pathetic, half humorous picture of the miserable Rupert staggering under the double burden of his sleeping brother and a misplaced affection, or possibly abandoning the one or both in the nearest ditch in a reckless access of boyish frenzy and fleeing his home forever, rose before his eyes. He seized his hat with the intention of seeking him—or forgetting him in some other occupation by the way. For Mr. Ford had the sensitive conscience of many imaginative people; an unfailing monitor, it was always calling his whole moral being into play to evade it.

As he crossed the passage he came upon Mrs. Tripp hooded and elaborately attired in a white ball dress, which however did not, to his own fancy, become her as well as her ordinary costume. He was passing her with a bow, when she said, with complacent consciousness of her appearance, “Are n’t you going to the ball to-night?”

He remembered then that "an opening ball" at the Court-house was a part of the celebration. "No," he said smiling; "but it is a pity that Rupert could n't have seen you in your charming array."

"Rupert," said the lady, with a slightly coquettish laugh; "you have made him as much a woman-hater as yourself. I offered to take him in our party, and he ran away to you." She paused, and giving him a furtive critical glance said, with an easy mingling of confidence and audacity, "Why don't *you* go? Nobody 'll hurt you."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Mr. Ford gallantly. "There's the melancholy example of Rupert always before me."

Mrs. Tripp tossed her chignon and descended a step of the stairs. "You'd better go," she continued, looking up over the balusters. "You can look on if you can't dance."

Now Mr. Ford *could* dance, and it so chanced, rather well, too. With this consciousness he remained standing in half indignant hesitation on the landing as she disappeared. Why should n't he go? It was true, he had half tacitly acquiesced in the reserve with which he had been treated, and

had never mingled socially in the gatherings of either sex at Indian Spring — but that was no reason. He could at least dress himself, walk to the Court-house and — look on.

Any black coat and white shirt was sufficiently *de rigueur* for Indian Spring. Mr. Ford added the superfluous elegance of a forgotten white waistcoat. When he reached the sidewalk it was only nine o'clock, but the windows of the Court-house were already flaring like a stranded steamer on the barren bank where it had struck. On the way thither he was once or twice tempted to change his mind, and hesitated even at the very door. But the fear that his hesitation would be noticed by the few loungers before it, and the fact that some of them were already hesitating through bashfulness, determined him to enter.

The clerks' office and judges' chambers on the lower floor had been invaded by wraps, shawls, and refreshments, but the dancing was reserved for the upper floor or court-room, still unfinished. Flags, laurel-wreaths, and appropriate floral inscriptions hid its bare walls; but the coat of arms of the State, already placed over the judges'

dais with its illimitable golden sunset, its triumphant goddess, and its implacable grizzly, seemed figuratively to typify the occasion better than the inscriptions. The room was close and crowded. The flickering candles in tin sconces against the walls, or depending in rude chandeliers of barrel-hoops from the ceiling, lit up the most astounding diversity of female costume the master had ever seen. Gowns of bygone fashions, creased and stained with packing and disuse, toilets of forgotten festivity revised with modern additions; garments in and out of season — a fur-trimmed jacket and a tulle skirt, a velvet robe under a piqué sacque; fresh young faces beneath faded head-dresses, and mature and buxom charms in virgin white. The small space cleared for the dancers was continually invaded by the lookers-on, who in files of three deep lined the room.

As the master pushed his way to the front, a young girl, who had been standing in the sides of a quadrille, suddenly darted with a nymph-like quickness among the crowd and was for an instant hidden. Without distinguishing either face or figure, Mr. Ford recognized in the quick, impetuous ac-

tion a characteristic movement of Cressy's; with an embarrassing instinct that he could not account for, he knew she had seen him, and that, for some inexplicable reason, he was the cause of her sudden disappearance.

But it was only for a moment. Even while he was vaguely scanning the crowd she reappeared and took her place beside her mystified partner — the fascinating stranger of Johnny's devotion and Rupert's dislike. She was pale; he had never seen her so beautiful. All that he had thought distasteful and incongruous in her were but accessories of her loveliness at that moment, in that light, in that atmosphere, in that strange assembly. Even her full pink gauze dress, from which her fair young shoulders slipped as from a sunset cloud, seemed only the perfection of virginal simplicity; her girlish length of limb and the long curves of her neck and back were now the outlines of thorough breeding. The absence of color in her usually fresh face had been replaced by a faint magnetic aurora that seemed to him half spiritual. He could not take his eyes from her; he could not believe what he saw. Yet that was Cressy McKinstry — his pupil! Had he ever really seen her?

Did he know her now? Small wonder that all eyes were bent upon her, that a murmur of unspoken admiration, or still more intense hush of silence moved the people around him. He glanced hurriedly at them, and was oddly relieved by this evident participation in his emotions.

She was dancing now, and with that same pale restraint and curious quiet that had affected him so strongly. She had not even looked in his direction, yet he was aware by the same instinct that had at first possessed him that she knew he was present. His desire to catch her eye was becoming mingled with a certain dread, as if in a single interchange of glances the illusions of the moment would either vanish utterly or become irrevocably fixed. He forced himself, when the set was finished, to turn away, partly to avoid contact with some acquaintances who had drifted before him, and whom politeness would have obliged him to ask to dance, and partly to collect his thoughts. He determined to make a tour of the rooms and then go quietly home. Those who recognized him made way for him with passive curiosity; the middle-aged and older adding a confidential sympathy and equality that positively

irritated him. For an instant he had an idea of seeking out Mrs. Tripp and claiming her as a partner, merely to show her that he danced.

He had nearly made the circuit of the room when he was surprised by the first strains of a waltz. Waltzing was not a strong feature of Indian Spring festivity, partly that the Church people had serious doubts if David's saltatory performances before the Ark included "round dances," and partly that the young had not yet mastered its difficulties. When he yielded to his impulse to look again at the dancers he found that only three or four couples had been bold enough to take the floor. Cressy McKinstry and her former partner were one of them. In his present exaltation he was not astonished to find that she had evidently picked up the art in her late visit, and was now waltzing with quiet grace and precision, but he was surprised that her partner was far from being equally perfect, and that after a few turns she stopped and smilingly disengaged her waist from his arm. As she stepped back she turned with unerring instinct to that part of the room where the master stood, and raised her eyes through

the multitude of admiring faces to his. Their eyes met in an isolation as supreme as if they had been alone. It was an attraction the more dangerous because unformulated — a possession without previous pledge, promise, or even intention — a love that did not require to be “made.”

He approached her quietly and even more coolly than he thought possible. “Will you allow me a trial?” he asked.

She looked in his face, and as if she had not heard the question but was following her own thought, said, “I knew you would come; I saw you when you first came in.” Without another word she put her hand in his, and as if it were part of an instinctive action of drawing closer to him, caught with her advancing foot the accent of the waltz, and the next moment the room seemed to slip away from them into whirling space.

The whole thing had passed so rapidly from the moment he approached her to the first graceful swing of her full skirt at his side, that it seemed to him almost like the embrace of a lovers’ meeting. He had often been as near her before, had stood at her side at school, and even leaned over her desk, but always with an irritated instinct

of reserve that had equally affected her, and which he now understood. With her conscious but pale face so near his own, with the faint odor of her hair clinging to her, and with the sweet confusion of the half lingering, half withheld contact of her hand and arm, all had changed. He did not dare to reflect that he could never again approach her except with this feeling. He did not dare to think of anything ; he abandoned himself to the sense that had begun with the invasion of her hair-bound myrtle in the silent school-room, and seemed to have at last led her to his arms. They were moving now in such perfect rhythm and unison that they seemed scarcely conscious of motion. Once when they neared the open window he caught a glimpse of the round moon rising above the solemn heights of the opposite shore, and felt the cool breath of mountain and river sweep his cheek and mingle a few escaped threads of her fair hair with his own. With that glimpse and that sensation the vulgarity and the tawdriness of their surroundings, the guttering candles in their sconces, the *bizarre* figures, the unmeaning faces seemed to be whirled far into distant space. They were alone with night and nature ; it was they who

were still ; all else had receded in a vanishing perspective of dull reality, in which they had no part.

Play on, O waltz of Strauss ! Whirl on, O love and youth ! For you cannot whirl so swiftly but that this receding world will return again with narrowing circle to hem you in. Faster, O cracked clarionet ! Louder, O too brazen bassoon ! Keep back, O dull and earthy environment, till master and pupil have dreamed their foolish dream !

They are in fancy alone on the river-bank, only the round moon above them and their linked shadows faintly fluttering in the stream. They have drawn so closely together now that her arm is encircling his neck, her soft eyes uplifted like the moon's reflection and drowning into his ; closer and closer till their hearts stop beating and their lips have met in a first kiss. Faster, O little feet ! swing clear, O Cressy's skirt and keep the narrowing circle back ! . . . They are again alone ; the judges' dais and the emblazoning of the State caught in a single whirling flash of consciousness are changed to an altar, seen dimly through the bridal veil that covers her fair head. There is the murmur of voices mingling two lives in one. They turn

and pass proudly down between the aisles of wondering festal faces. Ah! the circle is drawing closer. One more quick whirl to keep them back, O flying skirt and dainty-winged feet! Too late! The music stops. The tawdry walls shut in again, the vulgar crowds return, they stand pale and quiet, the centre of a ring of breathless, admiring, frightened, or forbidding faces. Her arms fold like wings at her side. The waltz is over.

A shrill feminine chorus assail her with praises, struck here and there with a metallic ring of envy; a dozen all-daring cavaliers, made reckless by her grace and beauty, clamor for her hand in the next waltz. She replies, not to them, but to him, "Not again," and slips away in the crowd with that strange new shyness that of all her transformations seems the most delicious. Yet so conscious are they of their mutual passion that they do not miss each other, and he turns away as if their next meeting were already an appointed tryst. A few congratulate him on his skill. Johnny's paragon looks after him curiously; certain elders shake hands with him perplexedly, as if not quite sure of the professional consistency of his performance.

Those charming tide-waiters on social success, the fair, artfully mingling expectation with compliment, only extract from him the laughing statement that this one waltz was the single exception allowed him from the rule of his professional conduct, and he refers them to his elder critics. A single face, loutish, looming, and vindictive, stands out among the crowd — the face of Seth Davis. He had not seen him since he left the school; he had forgotten his existence; even now he only remembered his successor, Joe Masters, and he looked curiously around to see if that later suitor of Cressy's was present. It was not until he reached the door that he began to think seriously of Seth Davis's jealous face, and was roused to a singular indignation. "Why had n't this great fool vented his jealousy on the openly compromising Masters," he thought. He even turned and walked back with some vaguely aggressive instinct, but the young man had disappeared. With this incident still in his mind he came upon Uncle Ben and Hiram McKinstry, standing among the spectators in the doorway. Why might not Uncle Ben be jealous too? and if his single waltz had really appeared so compromising, why should not

Cressy's father object? But both men — albeit, McKinstry usually exhibited a vague unreasoning contempt for Uncle Ben — were unanimous in their congratulations and outspoken admiration.

“When I see'd you sail in, Mr. Ford,” said Uncle Ben, with abstract reflectiveness, “I sez to the fellers, ‘lie low, boys, and you 'll see style.’ And when you put on them first steps, I sez, ‘that 's French — the latest high-toned French style — outer the best masters, and — and outer the best books. For why?’ sez I. ‘It 's the same long, sliding stroke you see in his copies. There 's that long up sweep, and that easy curve to the right with no hitch. That 's the sorter swing he hez in readin' po'try too. That 's why it 's called the po'try of motion,’ sez I. ‘And you ken bet your boots, boys, it 's all in the trainin' o' education.’ ”

“Mr. Ford,” said Mr. McKinstry gravely, slightly waving a lavender-colored kid glove, with which he had elected to conceal his maimed hand, and at the same moment indicate a festal occasion: “I hev to thank ye for the way you took out that child o' mine, like ez she woz an ontried filly, and put her through her paces. I don't dance myself,

partikly in that gait — which I take to be suthin' betwixt a lope and a canter — and I don't get to see much dancin' nowadays on account o' bein' worrited by stock, but seein' you two together just now, suthin' came over me, and I don't think I ever felt so kam in my life."

The blood rushed to the master's cheek with an unexpected consciousness of guilt and shame. "But," he stammered awkwardly, "your daughter dances beautifully herself; she has certainly had practice."

"That," said McKinstry, laying his gloved hand impressively on the master's shoulder, with the empty little finger still more emphasized by being turned backward in the act; "that may be ez it ez, but I wanted to say that it was the simple, easy, fammily touch that you gev it, that took me. Toward the end, when you kinder gathered her up and she sorter dropped her head into your breast-pocket, and seemed to go to sleep, like ez ef she was still a little girl, it so reminded me of the times when I used to tote her myself walkin' by the waggin at Platt River, that it made me wish the old woman was here to see it."

Still coloring, the master cast a rapid, side-

long glance at McKinstry's dark red face and beard, but in the slow satisfaction of his features there was no trace of that irony which the master's self-consciousness knew.

"Then your wife is not here?" said Mr. Ford abstractedly.

"She war at church. She reckoned that I 'd do to look arter Cressy — she bein', so to speak, under conviction. D' ye mind walkin' this way a bit; I want to speak a word with ye?" He put his maimed hand through the master's arm, after his former fashion, and led him to a corner.

"Did ye happen to see Seth Davis about yer?"

"I believe I saw him a moment ago," returned Mr. Ford half contemptuously.

"Did he get off anythin' rough on ye?"

"Certainly not," said the master haughtily. "Why should he dare?"

"That's so," said McKinstry meditatively. "You had better keep right on in that line. That's your gait, remember. Leave him — or his father — it's the same thing — to *me*. Don't *you* let yourself be roped in to this yer row betwixt me and the Davises. You ain't got no call to do it. It's already been on my mind your bringin' that gun to

me in the Harrison row. The old woman had n't oughter let you — nor Cress either. Hark to me, Mr. Ford! I reckon to stand between you and both the Davises till the cows come home — only — mind *you* give him the go-by when he happens to meander along towards you."

"I 'm very much obliged to you," said Ford with disproportionately sudden choler; "but I don't propose to alter my habits for a ridiculous school-boy whom I have dismissed." The unjust and boyish petulance of his speech instantly flashed upon him, and he felt his cheek burn again.

McKinstry regarded him with dull, red, slumbrous eyes. "Don't you go to lose your best holt, Mr. Ford — and that 's kam. Keep your kam — and you 've allus got the dead wood on Injin Springs. *I* ain't got it," he continued, in his slowest, most passionless manner, "and a row more or less ain't much account to me — but *you*, you keep your kam." He paused, stepped back, and regarding the master, with a slight wave of his crippled hand over his whole person, as if indicating some personal adornment, said, "It sets you off!"

He nodded, turned, and reëntered the

ball-room. Mr. Ford, without trusting himself to further speech, elbowed his way through the crowded staircase to the street. But even there his strange anger, as well as the equally strange remorse, which had seized him in McKinstry's presence, seemed to evaporate in the clear moonlight and soft summer air. There was the river-bank, with the tremulous river glancing through the dreamy mist, as they had seen it from the window together. He even turned to look back on the lighted ball-room, as if *she* might have been looking out, too. But he knew he should see her again to-morrow, and he hurriedly put aside all reserve, all thought of the future, all examination of his conduct, to walk home enwrapped in the vaguer pleasure of the past. Rupert Filgee, to whom he had never given a second thought, now peacefully slumbering beside his baby brother, had not gone home in more foolish or more dangerous company.

When he reached the hotel, he was surprised to find it only eleven o'clock. No one had returned, the building was deserted by all but the bar-keeper and a flirting chambermaid, who regarded him with aggrieved astonishment. He began to feel very foolish,

and half regretted that he had not stayed to dance with Mrs. Tripp; or, at least, remained as a quiet onlooker apart from the others. With a hasty excuse about returning to write letters for the morning's post, he took a candle and slowly remounted the stairs to his room. But on entering he found himself unprepared for that singular lack of sympathy with which familiar haunts always greet our new experiences; he could hardly believe that he had left that room only two hours before; it seemed so uncongenial and strange to the sensation that was still possessing him. Yet there were his table, his books, his arm-chair, his bed as he had left them; even a sticky fragment of gingerbread that had fallen from Johnny's pocket. He had not yet reached that stage of absorbing passion where he was able to put the loved one in his own surroundings; she as yet had no place in this quiet room; he could scarcely think of her here, and he *must* think of her, if he had to go elsewhere. An extravagant idea of walking the street until his restless dream was over seized him, but even in his folly the lackadaisical, moonstruck quality of such a performance was too obvious.

The school-house ! He would go there ; it was only a pleasant walk, the night was lovely, and he could bring the myrtle-spray from his desk. It was too significant now — if not too precious — to be kept there. Perhaps he had not examined it closely, nor the place where it had lain ; there might be an additional sign, word, or token he had overlooked. The thought thrilled him, even while he was calmly arguing to himself that it was an instinct of caution.

The air was quieter and warmer than usual, though still characteristic of the locality in its dry, dewless clarity. The grass was yet warm from the day-long sun, and when he entered the pines that surrounded the school-house, they had scarcely yet lost their spicy heat. The moon, riding high, filled the dark aisles with a delicious twilight that lent itself to his waking dreams. It was not long before to-morrow ; he could easily manage to bring her here in the grove at recess, and would speak with her there. It did not occur to him what he should say, or why he should say it ; it did not occur to him that he had no other provocation than her eyes, her conscious manner, her eloquent silence, and her admission that she had ex-

pected him. It did not occur to him that all this was inconsistent with what he knew of her antecedents, her character, and her habits. It was this very inconsistency that charmed and convinced him. We are always on the lookout for these miracles of passion. We may doubt the genuineness of an affection that is first-hand, but never of one that is transferred.

He approached the school-house and unlocking the door closed it behind him, not so much to keep out human intrusion as the invasion of bats and squirrels. The nearly vertical moon, while it perfectly lit the playground and openings in the pines around the house, left the interior in darkness, except the reflection upon the ceiling from the shining gravel without. Partly from a sense of precaution and partly because he was familiar with the position of the benches, he did not strike a light, and reached his own desk unerringly, drew his chair before it and unlocked it, groped in its dark recess for the myrtle spray, felt its soft silken binding with an electrical thrill, drew it out, and in the security of the darkness, raised it to his lips.

To make room for it in his breast pocket

he was obliged to take out his letters — among them the well-worn one he had tried to read that morning. A mingling of pleasure and remorse came over him as he felt that it was already of the past, and as he dropped it carelessly into the empty desk it fell with a faint, hollow sound as if it were ashes to ashes.

What was that?

The noise of steps upon the gravel, light laughter, the moving of two or three shadows on the ceiling, the sound of voices, a man's, a child's, and *hers*!

Could it be possible? Was not he mistaken? No! the man's voice was Masters'; the child's, Octavia's; the woman's, *hers*.

He remained silent in the shadow. The school-room was not far from the trail where she would have had to pass going home from the ball. But why had she come there? had they seen him arrive? and were mischievously watching him? The sound of Cressy's voice and the lifting of the unprotected window near the door convinced him to the contrary.

"There, that'll do. Now you two can step aside. 'Tave, take him over to yon fence, and keep him there till I get in. No

— thank you, sir — I can assist myself. I've done it before. It ain't the first time I've been through this window, is it, 'Tave?"

Ford's heart stopped beating. There was a moment of laughing expostulation, the sound of retreating voices, the sudden darkening of the window, the billowy sweep of a skirt, the faint quick flash of a little ankle, and Cressy McKinstry swung herself into the room and dropped lightly on the floor.

She advanced eagerly up the moonlit passage between the two rows of benches. Suddenly she stopped; the master rose at the same moment with outstretched warning hand to check the cry of terror he felt sure would rise to her lips. But he did not know the lazy nerves of the girl before him. She uttered no outcry. And even in the faint dim light he could see only the same expression of conscious understanding come over her face that he had seen in the ball-room, mingled with a vague joy that parted her breathless lips. As he moved quickly forward their hands met; she caught his with a quick significant pressure and darted back to the window.

“ Oh, 'Tave ! ” (very languidly.)

“Yes.”

“You two had better wait for me at the edge of the trail yonder, and keep a lookout for folks going by. Don’t let them see you hanging round so near. Do you hear? I’m all right.”

With her hand still meaningly lifted, she stood gazing at the two figures until they slowly receded towards the distant trail. Then she turned as he approached her, the reflection of the moonlit road striking up into her shining eyes and eager waiting face. A dozen questions were upon his lips, a dozen replies were ready upon hers. But they were never uttered, for the next moment her eyes half closed, she leaned forward and fell — into a kiss.

She was the first to recover, holding his face in her hands, turned towards the moonlight, her own in passionate shadow. “Listen,” she said quickly. “They think I came here to look for something I left in my desk. They thought it high fun to come with me — these two. I did come to look for something — not in my desk, but yours.”

“Was it this?” he whispered, taking the myrtle from his breast. She seized it with a light cry, putting it first to her lips and

then to his. Then clasping his face again between her soft palms, she turned it to the window and said : " Look at them and not at me."

He did so — seeing the two figures slowly walking in the trail. And holding her there firmly against his breast, it seemed a blasphemy to ask the question that had been upon his lips.

" That's not all," she murmured, moving his face backwards and forwards to her lips as if it were something to which she was giving breath. " When we came to the woods I felt that you would be here."

" And feeling that, you brought *him* ?" said Ford, drawing back.

" Why not ?" she replied indolently. " Even if he had seen you, I could have managed to have you walk home with me."

" But do you think it's quite fair? Would he like it ?"

" Would *he* like it ?" she echoed lazily.

" Cressy," said the young man earnestly, gazing into her shadowed face. " Have you given him any right to object? Do you understand me ?"

She stopped as if thinking. " Do you want me to call him in ?" she said quietly,

but without the least trace of archness or coquetry. "Would you rather he were here — or shall we go out now and meet him? I'll say you just came as I was going out."

What should he say? "Cressy," he asked almost curtly, "do you love me?"

It seemed such a ridiculous thing to ask, holding her thus in his arms, if it were true; it seemed such a villainous question, if it were not.

"I think I loved you when you first came," she said slowly. "It must have been that that made me engage myself to him," she added simply. "I knew I loved you, and thought only of you when I was away. I came back because I loved you. I loved you the day you came to see Maw — even when I thought you came to tell her of Masters, and to say that you could n't take me back."

"But you don't ask me if *I* love you?"

"But you do — you could n't help it now," she said confidently.

What could he do but reply as illogically with a closer embrace, albeit a slight tremor as if a cold wind had blown across the open window, passed over him. She may have felt it too, for she presently said, "Kiss me and let me go."

"But we must have a longer talk, darling — when — when — others are not waiting."

"Do you know the far barn near the boundary?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I used to take your books there, afternoons to — to — be with you," she whispered, "and Paw gave orders that no one was to come nigh it while I was there. Come to-morrow, just before sundown."

A long embrace followed, in which all that they had not said seemed, to them at least, to become articulate on their tremulous and clinging lips. Then they separated, he unlocking the door softly to give her egress that way. She caught up a book from a desk in passing, and then slipped like a rosy shaft of the coming dawn across the fading moonlight, and a moment after her slow voice, without a tremor of excitement, was heard calling to her companions.

CHAPTER VII.

THE conversation which Johnny Filgee had overheard between Uncle Ben and the gorgeous stranger, although unintelligible to his infant mind, was fraught with some significance to the adult settlers of Indian Spring. The town itself, like most interior settlements, was originally a mining encampment, and as such its founders and settlers derived their possession of the soil under the mining laws that took precedence of all other titles. But although that title was held to be good even after the abandonment of their original occupation, and the establishment of shops, offices, and dwellings on the site of the deserted places, the suburbs of the town and outlying districts were more precariously held by squatters, under the presumption of their being public land open to preëmption, or the settlement of school-land warrants upon them. Few of the squatters had taken the trouble to perfect even these easy titles, merely holding "possession"

for agricultural or domiciliary purposes, and subject only to the invasion of "jumpers," a class of adventurers who, in the abeyance of recognized legal title, "jumped" or forcibly seized such portions of a squatter's domains as were not protected by fencing or superior force. It was therefore with some excitement that Indian Spring received the news that a Mexican grant of three square leagues, which covered the whole district, had been lately confirmed by the Government, and that action would be taken to recover possession. It was understood that it would not affect the adverse possessions held by the town under the mining laws, but it would compel the adjacent squatters like McKinstry, Davis, Masters, and Filgee, and jumpers like the Harrisons, to buy the legal title, or defend a slow but losing lawsuit. The holders of the grant — rich capitalists of San Francisco — were open to compromise to those in actual possession, and in the benefits of this compromise the unscrupulous "jumper," who had neither sown nor reaped, but simply dispossessed the squatter who had done both, shared equally with him.

A diversity of opinion as to the effect of the new claim naturally obtained; the older

settlers still clung to their experiences of an easy aboriginal holding of the soil, and were sceptical both as to the validity and justice of these revived alien grants ; but the newer arrivals hailed this certain tenure of legal titles as a guarantee to capital and an incentive to improvement. There was also a growing and influential party of Eastern and Northern men, who were not sorry to see a fruitful source of dissension and bloodshed removed. The feuds of the McKinstrys and Harrisons, kept alive over a boundary to which neither had any legal claim, would seem to bring them hereafter within the statute law regarding ordinary assaults without any ethical mystification. On the other hand McKinstry and Harrison would each be able to arrange any compromise with the new title holders for the lands they possessed, or make over that "actual possession" for a consideration. It was feared that both men, being naturally lawless, would unite to render any legal eviction a long and dangerous process, and that they would either be left undisturbed till the last, or would force a profitable concession. But a greater excitement followed when it was known that a section of the land had already been sold by

the owners of the grant, that this section exactly covered the debatable land of the McKinstry-Harrison boundaries, and that the new landlord would at once attempt its legal possession. The inspiration of genius that had thus effected a division of the Harrison-McKinstry combination at its one weak spot excited even the admiration of the sceptics. No one in Indian Spring knew its real author, for the suit was ostensibly laid in the name of a San Francisco banker. But the intelligent reader of Johnny Filgee's late experience during the celebration will have already recognized Uncle Ben as the man, and it becomes a part of this veracious chronicle at this moment to allow him to explain, not only his intentions, but the means by which he carried them out, in his own words.

It was one afternoon at the end of his usual solitary lesson, and the master and Uncle Ben were awaiting the arrival of Rupert. Uncle Ben's educational progress lately, through dint of slow tenacity, had somewhat improved, and he had just completed from certain forms and examples in a book before him a "Letter to a Consignee" informing him that he, Uncle Ben, had just shipped "2 cwt. Ivory Elephant Tusks, 80 peculs of

rice and 400bbls. prime mess pork from Indian Spring;" and another beginning "Honored Madam," and conveying in admirably artificial phraseology the "lamented decease" of the lady's husband from yellow fever, contracted on the Gold Coast, and Uncle Ben was surveying his work with critical satisfaction when the master, somewhat impatiently, consulted his watch. Uncle Ben looked up.

"I oughter told ye that Rupe did n't kalilate to come to-day."

"Indeed — why not?"

"I reckon because I told him he need n't. I allowed to — to hev' a little private talk with ye, Mr. Ford, if ye did n't mind."

Mr. Ford's face did not shine with invitation. "Very well," he said, "only remember I have an engagement this afternoon."

"But that ain't until about sundown," said Uncle Ben quietly. "I won't keep ye ez long ez that."

Mr. Ford glanced quickly at Uncle Ben with a rising color. "What do you know of my engagements?" he said sharply.

"Nothin', Mr. Ford," returned Uncle Ben simply; "but hevin' bin layin' round, lookin' for ye here and at the hotel for four or five

days allus about that time and not findin' you, I rather kalkilated you might hev' suthin' reg'lar on hand."

There was certainly nothing in his face or manner to indicate the least evasion or deceit, or indeed anything but his usual *naïveté*, perhaps a little perturbed and preoccupied by what he was going to say. "I had an idea of writin' you a letter," he continued, "kinder combinin' practice and confidential information, you know. To be square with you, Mr. Ford, in pint o' fact, I've got it *here*. But ez it don't seem to entirely gibe with the facts, and leaves a heap o' things onsaid and onseen, perhaps it's jest ez wall ez I read it to you myself—putten' in a word here and there, and explainin' it gin'rally. Do you *sabe*?"

The master nodded, and Uncle Ben drew from his desk a rude portfolio made from the two covers of a dilapidated atlas, and took from between them a piece of blotting-paper, which through inordinate application had acquired the color and consistency of a slate, and a few pages of copy-book paper, that to the casual glance looked like sheets of exceedingly difficult music. Surveying them with a blending of chirographic pride, ortho-

graphic doubt, and the bashful consciousness of a literary amateur, he traced each line with a forefinger inked to the second joint, and slowly read aloud as follows: —

“ ‘ Mr. Ford, Teacher.

“ ‘ DEAR SIR, — Yours of the 12th rec’d and contents noted.’ ” (“ I did n t,” explained Uncle Ben parenthetically, “ receive any letter of yours, but I thought I might heave in that beginning from copy for practice. The rest is *me*.”) “ ‘ In refference to my having munney,’ ” continued Uncle Ben reading and pointing each word as he read, “ ‘ and being able to buy Ditch Stocks an’ Land ’ ” —

“ One moment,” said Mr. Ford interrupting, “ I thought you were going to leave out copy. Come to what you have to say.”

“ But I *hev* — this is all real now. Hold on and you ’ll see,” said Uncle Ben. He resumed with triumphant emphasis: —

“ ‘ When it were gin’rally allowed that I haddent a red cent, I want to explain to you Mister Ford for the first time a secret. This here is how it was done. When I first came to Injian Spring, I settled down into the old Palmetto claim, near a heap of old taillings. Knowin’ it were against rools, and reg’lar Chinyman’s bizness to work them I didd n’t

let on to enyboddy what I did — witch was to turn over some of the quarts what I thought was likely and Orrifferus. Doing this I kem uppon some pay ore which them Palmetto fellers had overlookt, or more likely had kaved in uppon them from the bank on-known. Workin' at it in od times by and large, sometimes afore sun up and sometimes after sundown, and all the time keeping up a day's work on the clame for a show to the boys, I emassed a honist fortun in 2 years of 50,000 dolers and still am. But it will be askd by the incredjulos Reeder How did you never let out anything to Injian Spring, and How did you get rid of your yeald? Mister Ford, the Anser is I took it twist a month on hoss back over to La Port and sent it by express to a bank in Sacramento, givin' the name of Daubigny, witch no one in La Port took for me. The Ditch Stok and the Land was all took in the same name, hens the secret was onreviled to the General Eye — stop a minit,'” he interrupted himself quickly as the master in an accession of impatient scepticism was about to break in upon him, “it ain't all.” Then dropping his voice to a tremulous and almost funereal climax, he went on: —

“ ‘ Thus we see that pashent indurstry is Rewarded in Spite of Mining Rools and Reggylashuns, and Predgudisses agin Furrin Labor is played out and fleeth like a shad-or contenueyeth not long in One Spot, and that a Man may apear to be off no Account and yet Emass that witch is far abov rubles and Fadith not Away.

“ ‘ Hoppin’ for a continneyance

“ ‘ of your fevors I remain,

“ ‘ Yours to command,

“ ‘ BENJ D’AUBIGNY.’ ”

The gloomy satisfaction with which Uncle Ben regarded this peroration — a satisfaction that actually appeared to be equal to the revelation itself — only corroborated the master’s indignant doubts.

“ Come,” he said, impulsively taking the paper from Uncle Ben’s reluctant hand, “ how much of this is a concoction of yours and Rupe’s — and how much is a true story ? Do you really mean ? ” —

“ Hold on, Mr. Ford ! ” interrupted Uncle Ben, suddenly fumbling in the breast-pocket of his red shirt, “ I reckoned on your being a little hard with me, remembering our first talk ’bout these things — so I allowed I’d

bring you some proof." Slowly extracting a long legal envelope from his pocket, he opened it, and drew out two or three crisp certificates of stock, and handed them to the master.

"Ther's one hundred shares made out to Benj Daubigny. I'd hev brought you over the deed of the land too, but ez it's rather hard to read off-hand, on account of the law palaver, I've left it up at the shanty to tackle at odd times by way of practising. But ef you like we'll go up thar, and I'll show it to you."

Still haunted by his belief in Uncle Ben's small duplicities, Mr. Ford hesitated. These were certainly *bonâ fide* certificates of stock made out to "Daubigny." But he had never actually accepted Uncle Ben's statement of his identity with that person, and now it was offered as a corroboration of a still more improbable story. He looked at Uncle Ben's simple face slightly deepening in color under his scrutiny — perhaps with conscious guilt.

"Have you made anybody your confidant? Rupe, for instance?" he asked significantly.

"In course not," replied Uncle Ben with a slight stiffening of wounded pride. "On'y

yourself, Mr. Ford, and the young feller Stacey from the bank — ez was obligated to know it. In fact, I wos kalkilatin' to ask you to help me talk to him about that yer boundary land."

Mr. Ford's scepticism was at last staggered. Any practical joke or foolish complicity between the agent of the bank and a man like Uncle Ben was out of the question, and if the story were his own sole invention, he would have scarcely dared to risk so accessible and uncompromising a denial as the agent had it in his power to give.

He held out his hand to Uncle Ben. "Let me congratulate you," he said heartily, "and forgive me if your story really sounded so wonderful I could n't quite grasp it. Now let me ask you something more. Have you had any reason for keeping this a secret, other than your fear of confessing that you violated a few bigoted and idiotic mining rules — which, after all, are binding only upon sentiment — and which your success has proved to be utterly impractical?"

"There *was* another reason, Mr. Ford," said Uncle Ben, wiping away an embarrassed smile with the back of his hand, "that is, to be square with you, *why* I thought of

consultin' you. I did n't keer to have McKinstry, and" — he added hurriedly, "in course Harrison, too, know that I bought up the title to thar boundary."

"I understand," nodded the master. "I should n't think you would."

"Why should n't ye?" asked Uncle Ben quickly.

"Well — I don't suppose you care to quarrel with two passionate men."

Uncle Ben's face changed. Presently, however, with his hand to his face, he managed to manipulate another smile, only it appeared for the purpose of being as awkwardly wiped away.

"Say *one* passionate man, Mr. Ford."

"Well, one if you like," returned the master cheerfully. "But for the matter of that, why any? Come — do you mind telling me why you bought the land at all? You know it's of little value to any but McKinstry and Harrison."

"Suppose," said Uncle Ben slowly, with a great affectation of wiping his ink-spotted desk with his sleeve, "suppose that I had got kinder tired of seein' McKinstry and Harrison allus fightin' and scrimmagin' over their boundary line. Suppose I kalkilated

that it warn't the sort o' thing to induce folks to settle here. Soppose I reckoned that by gettin' the real title in my hands I'd have the deadwood on both o' them, and settle the thing my own way, eh?"

"That certainly was a very laudable intention," returned Mr. Ford, observing Uncle Ben curiously, "and from what you said just now about one passionate man, I suppose you have determined already *who* to favor. I hope your public spirit will be appreciated by Indian Spring at least — if it is n't by those two men."

"You lay low and keep dark and you'll see," returned his companion with a hopefulness of speech which his somewhat anxious eagerness however did not quite bear out. "But you 're not goin' yet, surely," he added, as the master again absently consulted his watch. "It's on'y half past four. It's true thar ain't any more to tell," he added simply, "but I had an idea that you might hev took to this yer little story of mine more than you 'pear to be, and might be askin' questions and kinder bedevlin' me with jokes ez to what I was goin' to do — and all that. But p'raps it don't seem so wonderful to you arter all. Come to think of it — squarely

now," he said, with a singular despondency, "I'm rather sick of it myself — eh?"

"My dear old boy," said Ford, grasping both his hands, with a swift revulsion of shame at his own utterly selfish abstraction, "I am overjoyed at your good luck. More than that, I can say honestly, old fellow, that it could n't have fallen in more worthy hands, or to any one whose good fortune would have pleased me more. There! And if I've been slow and stupid in taking it in, it is because it's so wonderful, so like a fairy tale of virtue rewarded — as if you were a kind of male Cinderella, old man!" He had no intention of lying — he had no belief that he was: he had only forgotten that his previous impressions and hesitations had arisen from the very fact that he *did* doubt the consistency of the story with his belief in Uncle Ben's weakness. But he thought himself now so sincere that the generous reader, who no doubt is ready to hail the perfect equity of his neighbor's good luck, will readily forgive him.

In the plenitude of this sincerity, Ford threw himself at full length on one of the long benches, and with a gesture invited Uncle Ben to make himself equally at his

ease. "Come," he said with boyish gayety, "let's hear your plans, old man. To begin with, who's to share them with you? Of course there are 'the old folks at home' first; then you have brothers — and perhaps sisters?" He stopped and glanced with a smile at Uncle Ben; the idea of there being a possible female of his species struck his fancy.

Uncle Ben, who had hitherto always exercised a severe restraint — partly from respect and partly from caution — over his long limbs in the school-house, here slowly lifted one leg over another bench, and sat himself astride of it, leaning forward on his elbow, his chin resting between his hands.

"As far as the old folks goes, Mr. Ford, I'm a kind of an orphan."

"A *kind* of orphan?" echoed Ford.

"Yes," said Uncle Ben, leaning heavily on his chin, so that the action of his jaws with the enunciation of each word slightly jerked his head forward as if he were imparting confidential information to the bench before him. "Yes, that is, you see, I'm all right ez far as the old man goes — *he's* dead; died way back in Mizzouri. But ez to my mother, it's sorter betwixt and be-

tween — kinder unsartain. You see, Mr. Ford, she went off with a city feller — an entire stranger to me — afore the old man died, and that's wot broke up my schoolin'. Now whether she's here, there, or yon, can't be found out, though Squire Tompkins allowed — and he were a lawyer — that the old man could get a divorce if he wanted, and that you see would make me a whole orphan, ef I keerd to prove title, ez the lawyers say. Well — thut sorter lets the old folks out. Then my brother was onc't drowned in the North Platt, and I never had any sisters. That don't leave much family for plannin' about — does it?"

"No," said the master reflectively, gazing at Uncle Ben, "unless you avail yourself of your advantages now and have one of your own. I suppose now that you are rich, you'll marry."

Uncle Ben slightly changed his position, and then with his finger and thumb began to apparently feed himself with certain crumbs which had escaped from the children's luncheon-baskets and were still lying on the bench. Intent on this occupation and without raising his eyes to the master, he returned slowly, "Well, you see, I'm sorter married already."

The master sat up quickly.

"What, *you* married — now?"

"Well, perhaps that's a question. It's a good deal like my bein' an orphan — oncertain and onsettled." He paused to pursue an evasive crumb to the end of the bench and having captured it, went on: "It was when I was younger than you be, and she war n't very old neither. But she knew a heap more than I did; and ez to readin' and writin', she was thar, I tell you, every time. You'd hev admired to see her, Mr. Ford." As he paused here as if he had exhausted the subject, the master said impatiently, "Well, where is she now?"

Uncle Ben shook his head slowly. "I ain't seen her sens I left Mizzouri, goin' on five years ago."

"But why have n't you? What was the matter?" persisted the master.

"Well — you see — I runned away. Not *she*, you know, but *I* — *I* scooted, skedaddled out here."

"But what for?" asked the master, regarding Uncle Ben with hopeless wonder. "Something must have happened. What was it? Was she" —

"She was a good schollard," said Uncle

Ben gravely, "and allowed to be sech, by all. She stood about so high," he continued, indicating with his hand a medium height. "War little and dark complected."

"But you must have had some reason for leaving her?"

"I've sometimes had an idea," said Uncle Ben cautiously, "that mebbe runnin' away ran in some fam'lies. Now, there war my mother run off with an entire stranger, and yer's me ez run off by myself. And what makes it the more one-like is that jest as dad allus allowed he could get a devorce agin mother, so my wife could hev got one agin me for leavin' her. And it's almost an evenhanded game that she hez. It's there where the oncertainty comes in."

"But are you satisfied to remain in this doubt? or do you propose, now that you are able, to institute a thorough search for her?"

"I was kalkilatin' to look around a little," said Uncle Ben simply.

"And return to her if you find her?" continued the master.

"I did n't say that, Mr. Ford."

"But if she has n't got a divorce from you that's what you'll have to do, and what

you ought to do — if I understand your story. For by your own showing, a more causeless, heartless, and utterly inexcusable desertion than yours, I never heard of.”

“Do you think so?” said Uncle Ben with exasperating simplicity.

“Do *I* think so?” repeated Mr. Ford, indignantly. “Everybody ’ll think so. They can’t think otherwise. You say you deserted her, and you admit she did nothing to provoke it.”

“No,” returned Uncle Ben quickly, “nothin’. Did I tell you, Mr. Ford, that she could play the pianner and sing?”

“No,” said Mr. Ford, curtly, rising impatiently and crossing the room. He was more than half convinced that Uncle Ben was deceiving him. Either under the veil of his hide-bound simplicity he was an utterly selfish, heartless, secretive man, or else he was telling an idiotic falsehood.

“I’m sorry I can neither congratulate you nor condole with you on what you have just told me. I cannot see that you have the least excuse for delaying a single moment to search for your wife and make amends for your conduct. And if you want my opinion it strikes me as being a much

more honorable way of employing your new riches than mediating in your neighbors' squabbles. But it's getting late and I'm afraid we must bring our talk to an end. I hope you'll think this over before we meet again — and think differently."

Nevertheless, as they both left the school-house, Mr. Ford lingered over the locking of the door to give Uncle Ben a final chance for further explanation. But none came. The new capitalist of Indian Spring regarded him with an intensification of his usual half sad, half embarrassed smile, and only said: "You understand this yer's a secret, Mr. Ford?"

"Certainly," said Ford with ill-concealed irritation.

"'Bout my bein' sorter married?"

"Don't be alarmed," he responded dryly; "it's not a taking story."

They separated; Uncle Ben, more than ever involved in his usual unsatisfactory purposes, wending his way towards his riches; the master lingering to observe his departure before he plunged, in virtuous superiority, into the woods that fringed the Harrison and McKinstry boundaries.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE religious attitude which Mrs. McKinstry had assumed towards her husband's weak civilized tendencies was not entirely free from human rancor. That strong loyal nature which had unsexed itself in the one idea of duty, now that duty seemed to be no longer appreciated took refuge in her forgotten womanhood and in the infinitesimally small arguments, resources, and manœuvres at its command. She had conceived a singular jealousy of this daughter who had changed her husband's nature, and who had supplanted the traditions of the household life; she had acquired an exaggerated depreciation of those feminine charms which had never been a factor in her own domestic happiness. She saw in her husband's desire to mitigate the savage austerities of their habits only a weak concession to the powers of beauty and adornment — degrading vanities she had never known in their life-long struggle for frontier supremacy —

that had never brought them victorious out of that struggle. "Frizzles," "furbloWS," and "fancy fixin's" had never helped them in their exodus across the plains; had never taken the place of swift eyes, quick ears, strong hands, and endurance; had never nursed the sick or bandaged the wounded. When envy or jealousy invades the female heart after forty it is apt to bring a bitterness which knows no attenuating compensation in that coquetry, emulation, passionate appeal, or innocent tenderness, which makes tolerable the jealous caprices of the younger woman. The struggle for rivalry is felt to be hopeless, the power of imitation is gone. Of her forgotten womanhood Mrs. McKinstry revived only a capacity to suffer meanly and inflict mean suffering upon others. In the ruined castle of her youth, and the falling in of banqueting hall and bower, the dungeon and torture-chamber appeared to have been left, or, to use her own metaphor, she had querulously complained to the parson that, "Accordin' to some folks, she mout hev bin the barren fig-tree e-lected to bear persimmums."

Her methods were not entirely different from those employed by her suffering sis-

terhood in like emergencies. The unlucky Hiram, "worried by stock," was hardly placated or consoled by learning from her that it was only the result of his own weakness, acting upon the cussedness of the stock-dispersing Harrisons; the perplexity into which he was thrown by the news of the new legal claim to his land was not soothed by the suggestion that it was a trick of that Yankee civilization to which he was meanly succumbing. She who had always been a rough but devoted nurse in sickness was now herself overtaken by vague irregular disorders which involved the greatest care and the absence of all exciting causes. The attendance of McKinstry and Cressy at a "crazy quilting party" had brought on "blind chills;" the importation of a melodeon for Cressy to play on had superinduced an "innerd rash," and a threatened attack of "palsy creeps" had only been warded off by the timely postponement of an evening party suggested by her daughter. The old nomadic instinct, morbidly excited by her discontent, caused her to lay artful plans for a further emigration. She knew she had the germs of "mash fever" caught from the adjacent

river; she related mysterious information, gathered in "class meeting," of the superior facilities for stock raising on the higher foot-hills; she resuscitated her dead and gone Missouri relations in her daily speech, to a manifest invidious comparison with the living; she revived even the incidents of her early married life with the same baleful intent. The acquisition of a few "biled shirts" by Hiram for festive appearances with Cressy painfully reminded her that he had married her in "hickory;" she further accented the change by herself appearing in her oldest clothes, on the hypothesis that it was necessary for some one to keep up the traditions of the past.

Her attitude towards Cressy would have been more decided had she ever possessed the slightest influence over her, or had even understood her with the intuitive sympathies of the maternal relations. Yet she went so far as to even openly regret the breaking off of the match with Seth Davis, whose family, at least, still retained the habits and traditions she revered; but she was promptly silenced by her husband informing her that words "that had to be tuk back" had already passed between him and

Seth's father, and that, according to those same traditions, blood was more likely to be spilled than mingled. Whether she was only withheld from attempting a reconciliation herself through lack of tact and opportunity remains to be seen. For the present she encouraged Masters's attentions under a new and vague idea that a flirtation which distracted Cressy from her studies was displeasing to McKinstry and inimical to his plans. Blindly ignorant of Mr. Ford's possible relations to her daughter, and suspecting nothing, she felt towards him only a dull aversion as being the senseless pivot of her troubles. Seeing no one, and habitually closing her ears to any family allusion to Cressy's social triumphs, she was unaware of even the popular admiration their memorable waltz had excited.

On the morning of the day that Uncle Ben had confided to the master his ingenious plan for settling the boundary disputes, the barking of McKinstry's yellow dog announced the approach of a stranger to the ranch. It proved to be Mr. Stacey — not only as dazzlingly arrayed as when he first rose above Johnny Filgee's horizon, but wearing, in addition to his jaunty business

air, a look of complacent expectation of the pretty girl whom he had met at the ball. He had not seen her for a month. It was a happy inspiration of his own that enabled him to present himself that morning in the twin functions of a victorious Mercury and Apollo.

McKinstry had to be summoned from an adjacent meadow, while Cressy, in the mean time, undertook to entertain the gallant stranger. This was easily done. It was part of her fascinations that, disdaining the ordinary real or assumed ignorance of the *ingénue* of her class, she generally exhibited to her admirers (with perhaps the single exception of the master) a laughing consciousness of the state of mind into which her charms had thrown them. She understood their passion if she could not accept it. This to a bashful rustic community was helpful, but in the main unsatisfactory; with advances so promptly unmasked, the most strategic retreat was apt to become an utter rout. Leaning against the lintel of the door, her curved hand shading the sparkling depths of her eyes, and the sunlight striking down upon the pretty curves of her languid figure, she awaited the attack.

"I haven't seen you, Miss Cressy, since we danced together — a month ago."

"That was mighty rough papers," said Cressy, who was purposely dialectical to strangers, "considering that you trapsed up and down the lane, past the house, twice yesterday."

"Then you saw me?" said the young man, with a slightly discomfited laugh.

"I did. And so did the hound, and so, I reckon, did Joe Masters and the hired man. And when you pranced back on the home stretch, there was the hound, Masters, the hired man, and Maw all on your trail, and Paw bringin' up the rear with a shot-gun. There was about a half a mile of you altogether." She removed her hand from her eyes to indicate with a lazily graceful sweep this somewhat imaginative procession, and laughed.

"You are certainly well guarded," said Stacey hesitatingly; "and looking at you, Miss Cressy," he added boldly, "I don't wonder at it."

"Well, it *is* reckoned that next to Paw's boundaries I'm pretty well protected from squatters and jumpers."

Forceful and quaint as her language was,

the lazy sweetness of her intonation, and the delicate refinement of her face, more than atoned for it. It was unconventional and picturesque as her gestures. So at least thought Mr. Stacey, and it emboldened him to further gallantry.

“Well, Miss Cressy, as my business with your father to-day was to try to effect a compromise of his boundary claims, perhaps you might accept my services in your own behalf.”

“Which means,” responded the young lady pertly, “the same thing to *me* as to Paw. No trespassers but yourself. Thank you, sir.” She twirled lightly on her heel and dropped him that exaggerated curtsy known to the school-children as a “cheese.” It permitted in its progress the glimpse of a pretty little slipper which completed his subjugation.

“Well, if it’s only a fair compromise,” he began laughingly.

“Compromise means somebody giving up. Who is it?” she asked.

The infatuated Stacey had reached the point of thinking this repartee if possible more killing than his own.

“Ha! That’s for Miss Cressy to say.”

But the young lady leaning back against the lintel with the comfortable ease of being irresponsibly diverted, sagely pointed out that that was the function of the arbitrator.

“Ah well, suppose we begin by giving up Seth Davis, eh? You see that I ’m pretty well posted, Miss Cressy.”

“You alarm me,” said Cressy sweetly. “But I reckon he *had* given up.”

“He was in the running that night at the ball. Looked half savage while I was dancing with you. Wanted to eat me.”

“Poor Seth! And he used to be so particular in his food,” said the witty Cressy.

Mr. Stacey was convulsed. “And there ’s Mr. Dabney — Uncle Ben,” he continued, “eh? Very quiet but very sly. A dark horse, eh? Pretends to take lessons for the sake of being near some one, eh? Would he were a boy again because somebody else is a girl?”

“I should be frightened of you if you lived here always,” returned Cressy with invincible *naïveté*; “but perhaps then you would n’t know so much.”

Stacey simply accepted this as a compliment. “And there ’s Masters,” he said insinuatingly.

“Not Joe?” said Cressy with a low laugh, turning her eyes to the door.

“Yes,” said Stacey with a quick, uneasy smile. “Ah! I see we mustn’t drop *him*. Is he out *there*?” he added, trying to follow the direction of her eyes.

But the young girl kept her face studiously averted. “Is that all?” she asked after a pause.

“Well — there’s that solemn school-master, who cut me out of the waltz with you — that Mr. Ford.”

Had he been a perfectly cool and impartial observer he would have seen the slight tremor cross Cressy’s soft eyelids even in profile, followed by that momentary arrest of her whole face, mouth, dimples, and eyes, which had overtaken it the night the master entered the ball-room. But he was neither, and it passed quickly and unnoticed. Her usual lithe but languid play of expression and color came back, and she turned her head lazily towards the speaker. “There’s Paw coming. I suppose you would n’t mind giving me a sample of your style of arbitrating with him, before you try it on me?”

“Certainly not,” said Stacey, by no means displeased at the prospect of having so pretty

and intelligent a witness in the daughter of what he believed would form an attractive display of his diplomatic skill and graciousness to the father. "Don't go away. I've got nothing to say Miss Cressy could not understand and answer."

The jingling of spurs, and the shadow of McKinstry and his shot-gun falling at this moment between the speaker and Cressy, spared her the necessity of a reply. McKinstry cast an uneasy glance around the apartment, and not seeing Mrs. McKinstry looked relieved, and even the deep traces of the loss of a valuable steer that morning partly faded from his Indian-red complexion. He placed his shot-gun carefully in the corner, took his soft felt hat from his head, folded it and put it in one of the capacious pockets of his jacket, turned to his daughter, and laying his maimed hand familiarly on her shoulder, said gravely, without looking at Stacey, "What might the stranger be wantin', Cress?"

"Perhaps I'd better answer that myself," said Stacey briskly. "I'm acting for Benham and Co., of San Francisco, who have bought the Spanish title to part of this property. I" —

"Stop there!" said McKinstry, in a voice dull but distinct. He took his hat from his pocket, put it on, walked to the corner and took up his gun, looked at Stacey for the first time with narcotic eyes that seemed to drowsily absorb his slight figure, then put the gun back half contemptuously, and with a wave of his hand towards the door, said: "We'll settle this yer outside. Cress, you stop in here. There's man's talk goin' on."

"But, Paw," said Cressy, laying her hand languidly on her father's sleeve without the least change of color or amused expression. "This gentleman has come over here on a compromise."

"On a — *which?*" said McKinstry, glancing scornfully out of the door for some rare species of mustang vaguely suggested to him in that unfamiliar word.

"To see if we could n't come to some fair settlement," said Stacey. "I've no objection to going outside with you, but I think we can discuss this matter here just as well." His fine feathers had not made him a coward, although his heart had beaten a little faster at this sudden recollection of the dangerous reputation of his host.

"Go on," said McKinstry.

"The plain facts of the case are these," continued Stacey, with more confidence. "We have sold a strip of this property covering the land in dispute between you and Harrison. We are bound to put our purchaser in peaceable possession. Now to save time we are willing to buy that possession of any man who can give it. We are told that you can."

"Well, considerin' that for the last four years I've been fightin' night and day agin them low-down Harrisons for it, I reckon you've been lied to," said McKinsty deliberately. "Why — except the clearing on the north side, whar I put up a barn, thar ain't an acre of it as has n't been shifted first this side and then that as fast ez I druv boundary stakes and fences, and the Harrisons pulled 'em up agin. Thar ain't more than fifty acres ez I've hed a clear hold on, and I would n't hev had that ef it had n't bin for the barn, the raisin' alone o' which cost me a man, two horses, and this yer little finger."

"Put us in possession of even that fifty acres, and *we'll* undertake to hold the rest and eject those Harrisons from it," returned Stacey complacently. "You understand that

the moment we've made a peaceable entrance to even a foothold on your side, the Harrisons are only trespassers, and with the title to back us we can call on the whole sheriff's *posse* to put them off. That's the law."

"That ar the law?" repeated McKinstry meditatively.

"Yes," said Stacey. "So," he continued, with a self-satisfied smile to Cressy, "far from being hard on you, Mr. McKinstry, we're rather inclined to put you on velvet. We offer you a fair price for the only thing you can give us — actual possession; and we help you with your old grudge against the Harrisons. We not only clear them out, but we pay *you* for even the part they held adversely to you."

Mr. McKinstry passed his three whole fingers over his forehead and eyes as if troubled by a drowsy aching. "Then you don't reckon to hev anythin' to say to them Harrisons?"

"We don't propose to recognize them in the matter at all," returned Stacey.

"Nor allow 'em anythin'?"

"Not a cent! So you see, Mr. McKinstry," he continued magnanimously, yet with

a mischievous smile to Cressy, "there is nothing in this amicable discussion that requires to be settled outside."

"Ain't there?" said McKinstry, in a dull, deliberate voice, raising his eyes for the second time to Stacey. They were bloodshot, with a heavy, hanging furtiveness, not unlike one of his own hunted steers. "But I ain't kam enuff in yer." He moved to the door with a beckoning of his fateful hand. "Outside a minit — *ef* you please."

Stacey started, shrugged his shoulders, and half defiantly stepped beyond the threshold. Cressy, unchanged in color or expression, lazily followed to the door.

"Wot," said McKinstry, slowly facing Stacey; "wot ef I refoose? Wot ef I say I don't allow any man, or any bank, or any compromise, to take up my quo'r'lls? Wot ef I say that low-down and mean as them Harrisons is, they don't begin to be ez mean, ez low-down, ez underhanded, ez sneakin' ez that yer compromise? Wot ef I say that ef that's the kind o' hogwash that law and snivelization offers me for peace and quietness, I'll take the fightin', and the law-breakin', and the sheriff, and all h — ll for his *posse* instead? Wot ef I say that?"

“It will only be my duty to repeat it,” said Stacey, with an affected carelessness which, however, did not conceal his surprise and his discomfiture. “It’s no affair of mine.”

“Unless,” said Cressy, assuming her old position against the lintel of the door, and smoothing the worn bear-skin that served as a mat with the toe of her slipper, “unless you’ve mixed it up with your other arbitration, you know.”

“Wot other arbitration?” asked McKinstry suddenly, with murky eyes.

Stacey cast a rapid, half indignant glance at the young girl, who received it with her hands tucked behind her back, her lovely head bent submissively forward, and a prolonged little laugh.

“Oh nothing, Paw,” she said, “only a little private foolishness betwixt me and the gentleman. You’d admire to hear him talk, Paw — about other things than business. He’s just that chipper and gay.”

Nevertheless, as with a muttered “Good-morning” the young fellow turned away, she quietly brushed past her father, and followed him — with her hands still penitently behind her, and the rosy palms turned up-

ward — as far as the gate. Her single long Marguerite braid of hair trailing down her back nearly to the hem of her skirt, appeared to accent her demure reserve. At the gate she shaded her eyes with her hand, and glanced upward.

“It don’t seem to be a good day for arbitrating. A trifle early in the season, ain’t it?”

“Good-morning, Miss McKinstry.”

She held out her hand. He took it with an affected ease but cautiously, as if it had been the velvet paw of a young panther who had scratched him. After all, what was she but the cub of the untamed beast, McKinstry? He was well out of it! He was not revengeful — but business was business, and he had given them the first chance.

As his figure disappeared behind the buckeyes of the lane, Cressy cast a glance at the declining sun. She reëntered the house, and went directly to her room. As she passed the window, she could see her father already remounted galloping towards the tules, as if in search of that riparian “kam” his late interview had disturbed. A few straggling bits of color in the sloping meadows were the children coming home from

school. She hastily tied a girlish sun-bonnet under her chin, and slipping out of the back door, swept like a lissom shadow along the line of fence until she seemed to melt into the umbrage of the woods that fringed the distant north boundary.

CHAPTER IX.

MEANWHILE, unaware of her husband's sudden relapse to her old border principles and of the visit that had induced it, Mrs. McKinstry was slowly returning from a lugubrious recital of her moods and feelings at the parson's. As she crossed the barren flat and reached the wooded upland midway between the school-house and the ranch, she saw before her the old familiar figure of Seth Davis lounging on the trail. In her habitual loyalty to her husband's feuds she would probably have stalked defiantly past him, notwithstanding her late regrets of the broken engagement, but Seth began to advance awkwardly towards her. In fact, he had noticed the tall, gaunt, plaid-shawled and holland-bonneted figure approaching, and had waited for it.

As he seemed intent upon getting in her way she stopped and raised her right hand warningly before her. In spite of the shawl and the sun-bonnet, suffering had implanted

a rude Runic dignity to her attitude. "Words that hev to be took back, Seth Davis," she said hastily, "hev passed between you and my man. Out of my way, then, that I may pass, too."

"Not much betwixt you and me, Aunt Rachel," he said with slouching deprecation, using the old household title by which he had familiarly known her. "I've nothin' agin you — and I kin prove it by wot I'm yer to say. And I ain't trucklin' to yer for myself, for ez far ez me and your'n ez concerned," he continued, with a malevolent glance, "thar ain't gold enough in Caleforny to mak the weddin' ring that could hitch me and Cress together. I want to tell you that you're bein' played; that you're bein' befooled and bamboozled and honey-fogled. Thet while you're groanin' at class-meetin' and Hiram's quo'llin' with Dad, and Joe Masters waitin' round to pick up any bone that's throwed him, that sneakin', hypocritical Yankee school-master is draggin' your daughter to h—ll with him on the sly."

"Quit that, Seth Davis," said Mrs. McKinstry sternly, "or be man enough to tell it to a man. That's Hiram's business to know."

“And what if he knows it well enough and winks at it? What if he ’s willin’ enough to truckle to it, to curry favor with them sneakin’ Yanks?” said Seth malignantly.

A spasm of savage conviction seized Mrs. McKinstry. But it was more from her jealous fears of her husband’s disloyalty than concern for her daughter’s transgression. Nevertheless, she said desperately, “It ’s a lie. Where are your proofs?”

“Proofs?” returned Seth. “Who is it sneaks around the school-house to have private talks with the school-master, and edges him on with Cressy afore folks? Your husband. Who goes sneakin’ off every arternoon with that same cantin’ hound of a school-master? Your daughter. Who ’s been carryin’ on together, and hidin’ thick enough to be ridden out on a rail together? Your daughter and the school-master. Proofs? — ask anybody. Ask the children. Look yar — you, Johnny — come here.”

He had suddenly directed his voice to a blackberry bush near the trail, from which the curly head of Johnny Filgee had just appeared. That home-returning infant painfully disengaged himself, his slate, his

books, and his small dinner-pail half filled with fruit as immature as himself, and came towards them sideways.

"Yer 's a dime, Johnny, to git some candy," said Seth, endeavoring to distort his passion-set face into a smile.

Johnny Filgee's small, berry-stained palm promptly closed over the coin.

"Now, don't lie. Where 's Cressy?"

"Kithin' her bo."

"Good boy. What bo?"

Johnny hesitated. He had once seen the school-master and Cressy together; he had heard it whispered by the other children that they loved each other. But looking at Seth and Mrs. McKinstry he felt that something more tremendous than this stupid fact was required of him for grown-up people, and being honest and imaginative, he determined that it should be worth the money.

"Speak up, Johnny, don't be afeard to tell."

Johnny was not "afeard" — he was only thinking. He had it! He remembered that he had just seen his paragon, the brilliant Stacey, coming from the boundary woods. What more poetical and startlingly effective

than to connect him with Cressy? He replied promptly: —

“Mithter Thtathy. He gived her a watch and ring of truly gold. Goin’ to be married at Thacramento.”

“You lyin’ limb,” said Seth, seizing him roughly. But Mrs. McKinstry interposed.

“Let that brat go,” she said with gleaming eyes. “I want to talk to you.” Seth released Johnny. “It’s a trick,” he said, “he’s bin put up to it by that Ford.”

But Johnny, after securing a safe vantage behind the blackberry bush, determined to give them another trial — with facts.

“I know mor’n that,” he called out.

“Git — you measly pup,” said Seth savagely.

“I know Theriff Briggth, he rid over the boundary with a lot o’ men and horthes,” said Johnny, with that hurried delivery with which he was able to estop interruption. “Theed ’em go by. Maur Harrithon theth his dad’s goin’ to chuck out ole McKinstry. Hooray!”

Mrs. McKinstry turned her dark face sharply on Seth. “What’s that he sez?”

“Nothin’ but children’s gassin’,” he answered, meeting her eyes with an evil con-

sciousness half loutish, half defiant, "and ef it war true, it would only sarve Hiram McKinstry right."

She laid her hand upon his shoulder with swift suspicion. "Out o' my way, Seth Davis," she said suddenly, pushing him aside. "Ef this ez any underhanded work of yours, you 'll pay for it."

She strode past him in the direction of Johnny, but at the approach of the tall woman with the angry eyes, the boy flew. She hesitated a moment, turned again with a threatening wave of the hand to Seth, and started off rapidly in the direction of the boundary.

She had not placed so much faith in the boy's story as in the vague revelation of evil in Davis's manner. If there was any "cussedness" afoot, Seth, convinced of Cressy's unfaithfulness, and with no further hope of any mediation from the parents, would know it. Unless Hiram had been warned, he was still lulled in his fatuous dream of civilization. At that time he and his men were in the tules with the stock; to be satisfied, she herself must go to the boundary.

She reached the ridge of the cottonwoods

and sycamores, and a few hundred yards further brought her to the edge of that gentle southern slope which at last sank into the broad meadow of the debatable ground. In spite of Stacey's invidious criticism of its intrinsic value, this theatre of savage dissension, violence, and bloodshed was by some irony of nature a pastoral landscape of singular and peaceful repose. The soft glacis stretching before her was in spring cerulean with lupins, and later starred with *mariposas*. The meadow was transversely crossed by a curving line of alders that indicated a rare water-course, of which in the dry season only a single pool remained to flash back the unvarying sky. There had been no attempt at cultivation of this broad expanse; wild oats, mustard, and rank grasses left it a tossing sea of turbulent and variegated color whose waves rode high enough to engulf horse and rider in their choking depths. Even the traces of human struggle, the uprooted stakes, scattered fence-rails, and empty post-holes were forever hidden under these billows of verdure. Midway of the field and near the water-course arose McKinsty's barn — the solitary human structure whose rude, misshapen, bulging sides

and swallow-haunted eaves bursting with hay from the neighboring pasture, seemed however only an extravagant growth of the prolific soil. Mrs. McKinstry gazed at it anxiously. There was no sign of life or movement near or around it; it stood as it had always stood, deserted and solitary. But turning her eyes to the right, beyond the water-course, she could see a slight regular undulation of the grassy sea and what appeared to be the drifting on its surface of half a dozen slouched hats in the direction of the alders. There was no longer any doubt; a party from the other side was approaching the border.

A shout and the quick galloping of hoofs behind her sent a thrill of relief to her heart. She had barely time to draw aside as her husband and his followers swept past her down the slope. But it needed not his furious cry, "The Harrisons hev sold us out," to tell her that the crisis had come.

She held her breath as the cavalcade diverged, and in open order furiously approached the water-course, and she could see a sudden check and hesitation in the movement in the meadow at that unlooked-for onset. Then she thought of the barn. It

would be a rallying-point for them if driven back—a tower of defence if besieged. There were arms secreted beneath the hay for such an emergency. She would run there, swing-to its open doors, and get ready to barricade them.

She ran crouchingly, seeking the higher grasses and brambles of the ridge to escape observation from the meadow until she could descend upon the barn from the rear. She threw aside her impeding shawl; her brown holland sun-bonnet, torn off her head and hanging by its strings from her shoulders, let her coarse silver-threaded hair stream like a mane over her back; her face and hands were bleeding from thorns and whitened by dust. But she struggled on fiercely like some hunted animal until she reached the descending trail, when, letting herself go blindly, only withheld by the long grasses she clutched at wildly on either side, she half fell, half stumbled down the slope and emerged beside the barn, breathless and exhausted.

But what a contrast was there! For an instant she could scarcely believe that she had left the ridge with her husband's savage outcry in her ears, and in her eyes the swift

vision of his furious cavalcade. The boundary meadow was hidden by the soft lines of graceful willows in whose dim recesses the figures of the passionate horsemen seemed to have melted forever. There was nothing now to interrupt the long vista of peaceful beauty that stretched before her through this lonely hollow to the distant sleeping hills. The bursting barn in the foreground, heaped with grain that fringed its eaves and bristled from its windows and doors until its unlovely bulk was hidden in trailing feathery outlines; the gentle flutter of wings and soothing twitter of swallows and jays around its open rafters, and the drifting shadows of a few circling crows above it; the drowsy song of bees on the wild mustard that half hid its walls with yellow bloom; the sound of faintly-trickling water in one of those old Indian-haunted springs that had given its name to the locality; all these for an instant touched the senses of this hard, fierce woman as she had not been touched since she was a girl. For one brief moment the joys of peace and that matured repose that never had been hers flashed upon her; but with it came the savage consciousness that even now it was being

wrested away, and the thought fired her blood again. She listened eagerly for a second in the direction of the meadow; there was no report of fire-arms — there was yet time to prepare the barn for defence. She ran to the front of the building and seized the latch of the half-closed door. A little feminine cry that was half a laugh came from within, with the rapid rustle of a skirt and as the door swung open a light figure vanished through the rear window. The slanting sunlight falling in the shadowed interior disclosed only the single erect figure of the school-master — John Ford.

The first confusion and embarrassment of an interrupted rendezvous that had colored Ford's cheeks, gave way to a look of alarm as he caught sight of the bleeding face and dishevelled figure of Mrs. McKinstry. She saw it. To her distorted fancy it seemed only a proof of deeper guilt. Without a word she closed the heavy door behind her and swung the huge cross-bar unaided to its place. She then turned and confronted him, wiping the dust from her face and arms with her torn and dangling sun-bonnet in a way that recalled her attitude on the first day he had met her.

"That was Cress with ye?" she said.

He hesitated, still gazing at her in wonder.

"Don't lie."

He started. "I don't propose to," he retorted indignantly. "It was" —

"I don't ask ye how long this yer's bin goin' on," she said, pointing to Cressy's sun-bonnet, a few books, and a scattered nosegay of wild flowers lying on the hay; "and I don't want to know. In five minutes either her father will be here, or them hell-hounds of Harrison's who've sold him out will swarm round this barn to git possesshun. Ef this yer" — she again pointed contemptuously to the objects just indicated — "means that you've cast your lot with *us* and kalkilate to take our bitter with our sweet, ye'll lift up that stack of hay and bring out a gun to help defend it. Ef you're meanin' anythin' else, Ford, you'll hide yourself in that hay till Hiram comes and has time enough to attend to ye."

"And if I choose to do neither?" he said haughtily.

She looked at him in unutterable scorn. "There's the winder — take it while there's time, afore I bar it. Ef you see Hiram, tell

him ye left an old woman behind ye to defend the place whar you uster hide with her darter."

Before he could reply there was a distant report, followed almost directly by another. With a movement of irritation he walked to the window, turned and looked at her — bolted it, and came back.

"Where's that gun?" he said almost rudely.

"I reckon'd that would fetch ye," she said, dragging away the hay and disclosing a long trough-like box covered with tarpaulin. It proved to contain powder, shot, and two guns. He took one.

"I suppose I may know what I am fighting for?" he said dryly.

"Ye might say 'Cress' ef they" — indicating the direction of the reports — "happen to ask ye," she returned with equal sobriety. "Jess now ye kin take your stand up thar in the loft and see what's comin'."

He did not linger, but climbed to the place assigned him, glad to escape the company of the woman who at that moment he almost hated. In his unreflecting passion for Cressy he had always evaded the thought of this relationship or propinquity; the mother had

recalled it to him in a way that imperilled even his passion for the daughter ; his mind was wholly preoccupied with the idiotic, exasperating, and utterly hopeless position that had been forced upon him. In the bitterness of his spirit his sense of personal danger was so far absorbed that he speculated on the chance bullet in the *mêlée* that might end his folly and relieve him of responsibility. Shut up in a barn with a furious woman, in a lawless defence of questionable rights — with the added consciousness that an equally questionable passion had drawn him into it, and that *she* knew it — death seemed to offer the only escape from the explanation he could never give. If another sting could have been added it was the absurd conviction that Cressy would not appreciate his sacrifice, but was perhaps even at that moment calmly congratulating herself on the felicitousness of the complication in which she had left him.

Suddenly he heard a shout and the trampling of horse. The sides of the loft were scantily boarded to allow the extension of the pent-up grain, and between the interstices Ford, without being himself seen, had an uninterrupted view of the plain between him

and the line of willows. As he gazed, five men hurriedly issued from the extreme left and ran towards the barn. McKinstry and his followers simultaneously broke from the same covert further to the right and galloped forward to intercept them. But although mounted, the greater distance they had to traverse brought them to the rear of the building only as the Harrison party came to a sudden halt before the closed and barricaded doors of the usually defenceless barn. The discomfiture of the latter was greeted by a derisive shout from the McKinstry party — albeit, equally astonished. But in that brief moment Ford recognized in the leader of the Harrisons the well-known figure of the Sheriff of Tuolumne. It needed only this to cap the climax of the fatality that seemed to pursue him. He was no longer a lawless opposer of equally lawless forces, but he was actually resisting the law itself. He understood the situation now. It was some idiotic blunder of Uncle Ben's that had precipitated this attack.

The belligerents had already cocked their weapons, although the barn was still a rampart between the parties. But an adroit flanker of McKinstry's, creeping through the

tall mustard, managed to take up an enfilading position as the Harrisons advanced to break in the door. A threatening shout from the ambuscaded partisans caused them to hurriedly fall back towards the rear of the barn. There was a pause, and then began the usual Homeric chaff, — with this Western difference that it was cunningly intended to draw the other's fire.

"Why don't you blaze away at the door, you ——! It won't hurt ye!"

"He's afraid the bolt will shoot back!"
Laughter from the McKinstrys.

"Come outer the tall grass and show yourself, you black, mud-eating gopher."

"He can't. He's dropped his grit and is sarchin' for it." Goaded laughter from the Harrisons.

Each man waited for that single shot which would precipitate the fight. Even in their lawlessness the rude instinct of the duello swayed them. The officer of the law recognized the principle as well as its practical advantage in a collision, but he hesitated to sacrifice one of his men in an attack on the barn, which would draw the fire of McKinstry at that necessarily fatal range. As a brave man he would have taken the risk

himself, but as a prudent one, he reflected that his hurriedly collected *posse* were all partisans, and if he fell the conflict would resolve itself into a purely partisan struggle without a single unprejudiced witness to justify his conduct in the popular eye. The master also knew this ; it had checked his first impulse to come forward as a mediator ; his only reliance now was on Mrs. McKinstry's restraint and the sheriff's forbearance. The next instant both seemed to be imperilled.

" Well, why don't you wade in ? " sneered Dick McKinstry ; " who do you reckon's hidden in the barn ? "

" I 'll tell ye," said a harsh, passionate voice from the hill-side. " It's Cressy McKinstry and the school-master hidin' in the hay."

Both parties turned quickly towards the intruder who had approached them unperceived. But the speech was followed by a more startling revulsion of sentiment as Mrs. McKinstry's voice rang out from the barn, " You lie, Seth Davis ! "

The brief advantage offered to the sheriff in Davis's advent as a neutral witness, was utterly lost by this unlooked-for revelation

of Mrs. McKinstry's presence in the barn ! The fates were clearly against him ! A woman in the fight, and an old one at that ! A white woman to be forcibly ejected ! In the whole unwritten code of Southwestern chivalry there was no such precedent.

"Stand back," he said disgustedly to his followers, "stand back and let the d—d barn slide. But you, Hiram McKinstry, I'll give *you* five minutes to shake yourself clear of your wife's petticoats and git !" His blood was up now — the quicker from his momentary weakness and the trick of which he thought himself a dupe.

Again the fatal signal seemed imminent, again it was delayed. For Hiram McKinstry, with clanking spurs and rifle in hand stepped from behind the barn, full in the presence of his antagonists.

"Ez to my gitten in five minits," he began in his laziest, drowsiest manner, "we'll see when the time's up. But jest now words hev passed betwixt my wife and Seth Davis. Afore anythin' else goes on yer, he's got to take *his* back. My wife allows he lies ; I allow he lies too, and I stan' here to say it."

The right of personal insult to precedence of redress was too old a frontier principle to

be gainsaid now. Both parties held back and every eye was turned to where Seth Davis had been standing. But he had disappeared.

Where ?

When Mrs. McKinstry hurled her denial from the barn, he had taken advantage of the greater surprise to leap to one of the trusses of hay that projected beyond the loft, and secure a footing from which he quickly scrambled through the open scantling to the interior. The master who, startled by his voice, had made his way through the loose grain to the rear, reached it as Seth half crawled, half tumbled through. Their eyes met in a single flash of rage, but before Seth could utter an outcry, the master had dropped his gun, seized him around the neck and crammed a thick handful of the soft hay he had hurriedly snatched up into his face and gasping mouth. A furious but silent struggle ensued ; the yielding hay on which they both fell deadened all sound of a scuffle and concealed them from view ; masses of it, already loosened by the intruder's entrance, and dislodged in their contortions began to slip through the opening to the ground. The master, still uppermost and holding Seth

firmly down, allowed himself to slip with them, shoving his adversary before him; the maddened Missourian detecting his purpose, made a desperate attempt to change his position, and succeeded in raising his knee against the master's chest. Ford, guarding against what seemed to be only a wrestler's strategy, contented himself by locking the bent knee firmly in that position, and thus unwittingly gave Seth the looked-for opportunity of drawing the bowie-knife concealed in his boot leg. He knew his mistake only as Seth violently freed his arm, and threw it upward for the blow. He heard the steel slither like a scythe through the hay, and unlocking his hold desperately threw himself on the uplifted arm. The movement saved him. For the released body of Seth slipped rapidly through the opening, upheld for a single instant on the verge by the grasp of the master's two hands on the arm that still held the knife, and then dropped heavily downward. Even then, the hay that had slipped before him would have broken his fall, but his head came in violent contact with some farming implements standing against the wall, and without a cry he was stretched senseless on the ground. The

whole occurrence passed so rapidly and so noiselessly that not only did McKinsty's challenge fall upon his already unconscious ears, but the loosened hay which in the master's struggles to recover himself still continued to slide gently from the loft, actually hid him from the eyes of the spectators who sought him a moment afterwards. A mass of hay and wild oats, dislodged apparently by Mrs. McKinsty in securing her defences, was all that met their eyes ; even the woman herself was unconscious of the deadly struggle that had taken place above her.

The master staggered to an upright position half choked and half blinded with dust, turgid and bursting with the rush of blood to his head, but clear and collected in mind, and unremorsefully triumphant. Unconscious of the real extent of Seth's catastrophe he groped for and seized his gun, examined the cap and eagerly waited for a renewed attack. "He tried to kill me; he would have killed me; if he comes again I must kill him," he kept repeating to himself. It never occurred to him that this was inconsistent with his previous thought — indeed with the whole tenor of his belief. Perhaps the most peaceful man who has been once

put in peril of life by an adversary, who has recognized death threatening him in the eye of his antagonist, is by some strange paradox not likely to hold his own life or the life of his adversary as dearly as before. Everything was silent now. The suspense irritated him, he no longer dreaded but even longed for the shot that would precipitate hostilities. What were they doing? Guided by Seth, were they concerting a fresh attack?

Listening more intently he became aware of a distant shouting, and even more distinctly, of the dull, heavy trampling of hoofs. A sudden angry fear that the McKinstrys had been beaten off and were flying — a fear and anger that now, for the first time identified him with their cause — came over him, and he scrambled quickly towards the opening below. But the sound was approaching and with it came a voice.

“Hold on there, sheriff!”

It was the voice of the agent Stacey.

There was a pause of reluctant murmuring. But the warning was enforced by a command from another voice — weak, unheroic, but familiar, “I order this yer to stop — right yer!”

A burst of ironical laughter followed. The voice was Uncle Ben's.

"Stand back! This is no time for foolin'," said the sheriff roughly.

"He's right, Sheriff Briggs," said Stacey's voice hurriedly; "you're acting for *him*; he's the owner of the land."

"What? That Ben Dabney?"

"Yes; he's Daubigny, who bought the title from us."

There was a momentary hush, and then a hurried murmur.

"Which means, gents," rose Uncle Ben's voice persuasively, "that this yer young man, though fair-minded and well-intended, hez bin a leetle too chipper and previous in orderin' out the law. This yer ain't no law matter with *me*, boys. It ain't to be settled by law-papers, nor shot-guns and deringers. It's suthin' to be chawed over sociable-like, between drinks. Ef any harm hez bin done, ef anythin's happened, I'm yer to 'demnify the sheriff, and make it comf'ble all round. Yer know me, boys. I'm talkin'. It's me — Dabney, or Daubigny, which ever way you like it."

But in the silence that followed, the passions had not yet evidently cooled. It was

broken by the sarcastic drawl of Dick McKinstry: "If them Harrisons don't mind heaven had their medders trampled over by a few white men, why" —

"The sheriff ez 'demnified for that," interrupted Uncle Ben hastily.

"'N ef Dick McKinstry don't mind the damage to his pants in crawlin' out o' gunshot in the tall grass" — retorted Joe Harrison.

"I'm yer to settle that, boys," said Uncle Ben cheerfully.

"But who 'll settle *this*?" clamored the voice of the older Harrison from behind the barn where he had stumbled in crossing the fallen hay. "Yer's Seth Davis lyin' in the hay with the top of his head busted. Who's to pay for that?"

There was a rush to the spot, and a quick cry of reaction.

"Whose work is this?" demanded the sheriff's voice, with official severity.

The master uttered an instinctive exclamation of defiance, and dropping quickly to the barn floor, would the next moment have opened the door and declared himself, but Mrs. McKinstry, after a single glance at his determined face, suddenly threw herself be-

fore him with an imperious gesture of silence. Then her voice rang clearly from the barn : —

“ Well, if it’s the hound that tried to force his way in yer, I reckon ye kin put that down to ME ! ”

CHAPTER X.

It was known to Indian Spring, the next day, amid great excitement, that a serious fracas had been prevented on the ill-fated boundary by the dramatic appearance of Uncle Ben Dabney, not only as a peacemaker, but as Mr. Daubigny the *bonâ fide* purchaser and owner of the land. It was known and accepted with great hilarity that "old marm McKinstry" had defended the barn alone and unaided, with — as variously stated — a pitchfork, an old stable-broom, and a pail of dirty water, against Harrison, his party, and the entire able *posse* of the Sheriff of Tuolumne County, with no further damage than a scalp wound which the head of Seth Davis received while falling from the loft of the barn from which he had been dislodged by Mrs. McKinstry and the broom aforesaid. It was known with unanimous approbation that the acquisition of the land-title by a hitherto humble citizen of Indian Spring was a triumph of the settlement over foreign

interference. But it was not known that the school-master was a participant in the fight, or even present on the spot. At Mrs. McKinstry's suggestion he had remained concealed in the loft until after the withdrawal of both parties and the still unconscious Seth. When Ford had remonstrated, with the remark that Seth would be sure to declare the truth when he recovered his senses, Mrs. McKinstry smiled grimly: "I reckon when he comes to know *I* was with ye all the time, he'd rather hev it allowed that I licked him than *you*. I don't say he'll let it pass ez far ez you're concerned or won't try to get even with ye, but he won't go round tellin' *why*. However," she added still more grimly, "if you think you're ekul to tellin' the hull story — how ye kem to be yer and that Seth was n't lyin' arter all when he blurted it out afore 'em — why I sha'n't hinder ye." The master said no more. And indeed for a day or two nothing transpired to show that Seth was not equally reticent.

Nevertheless Mr. Ford was far from being satisfied with the issue of his adventure. His relations with Cressy were known to the mother, and although she had not again alluded to them, she would probably in-

form her husband. Yet he could not help noticing, with a mingling of unreasoning relief and equally unreasoning distrust, that she exhibited a scornful unconcern in the matter, apart from the singular use to which she had put it. He could hardly count upon McKinstry, with his heavy, blind devotion to Cressy, being as indifferent. On the contrary, he had acquired the impression, without caring to examine it closely, that her father would not be displeased at his marrying Cressy, for it would really amount to that. But here again he was forced to contemplate what he had always avoided, the possible meaning and result of their intimacy. In the reckless, thoughtless, extravagant — yet thus far innocent — indulgence of their mutual passion, he had never spoken of marriage, nor — and it struck him now with the same incongruous mingling of relief and uneasiness — had *she*! Perhaps this might have arisen from some superstitious or sensitive recollection on her part of her previous engagement to Seth, but he remembered now that they had not even exchanged the usual vows of eternal constancy. It may seem strange that, in the half-dozen stolen and rapturous in-

terviews which had taken place between these young lovers, there had been no suggestion of the future, nor any of those glowing projects for a united destiny peculiar to their years and inexperience. They had lived entirely in a blissful present, with no plans beyond their next rendezvous. In that mysterious and sudden absorption of each other, not only the past, but the future seemed to have been forgotten.

These thoughts were passing through his mind the next afternoon to the prejudice of that calm and studious repose which the deserted school-house usually superinduced, and which had been so fondly noted by McKinstry and Uncle Ben. The latter had not arrived for his usual lesson; it was possible that undue attention had been attracted to his movements now that his good fortune was known; and the master was alone save for the occasional swooping incursion of a depredatory jay in search of crumbs from the children's luncheons, who added apparently querulous insult to the larcenous act. He regretted Uncle Ben's absence, as he wanted to know more about his connection with the Harrison attack and his eventual intentions. Ever since the

master emerged from the barn and regained his hotel under cover of the darkness, he had heard only the vaguest rumors, and he purposely avoided direct inquiry.

He had been quite prepared for Cressy's absence from school that morning — indeed in his present vacillating mood he had felt that her presence would have been irksome and embarrassing; but it struck him suddenly and unpleasantly that her easy desertion of him at that critical moment in the barn had not since been followed by the least sign of anxiety to know the result of her mother's interference. What did she imagine had transpired between Mrs. McKinsty and himself? Had she confidently expected her mother's prompt acceptance of the situation and a reconciliation? Was that the reason why she had treated that interruption as lightly as if she were already his recognized betrothed? Had she even calculated upon it? had she —? He stopped, his cheek glowing from irritation under the suspicion, and shame at the disloyalty of entertaining it.

Opening his desk, he began to arrange his papers mechanically, when he discovered, with a slight feeling of annoyance, that he

had placed Cressy's bouquet — now dried and withered — in the same pigeon-hole with the mysterious letters with which he had so often communed in former days. He at once separated them with a half bitter smile, yet after a moment's hesitation, and with his old sense of attempting to revive a forgotten association, he tried to re-peruse them. But they did not even restrain his straying thoughts, nor prevent him from detecting a singular occurrence. The nearly level sun was, after its old fashion, already hanging the shadowed tassels of the pine boughs like a garland on the wall. But the shadow seemed to have suddenly grown larger and more compact, and he turned, with a quick consciousness of some interposing figure at the pane. Nothing however was to be seen. Yet so impressed had he been that he walked to the door and stepped from the porch to discover the intruder. The clearing was deserted, there was a slight rustling in the adjacent laurels, but no human being was visible. Nevertheless the old feeling of security and isolation which had never been quite the same since Mr. McKinstry's confession, seemed now to have fled the sylvan school-house altogether,

and he somewhat angrily closed his desk, locked it, and determined to go home.

His way lay through the first belt of pines towards the mining-flat, but to-day from some vague impulse he turned and followed the ridge. He had not proceeded far when he perceived Rupert Filgee lounging before him on the trail, and at a little distance further on his brother Johnny. At the sight of these two favorite pupils Mr. Ford's heart smote him with a consciousness that he had of late neglected them, possibly because Rupert's lofty scorn of the "silly" sex was not as amusing to him as formerly, and possibly because Johnny's curiosity had been at times obtrusive. He however quickened his pace and joined Rupert, laying his hand familiarly as of old on his shoulder. To his surprise the boy received his advances with some constraint and awkwardness, glancing uneasily in the direction of Johnny. A sudden idea crossed Mr. Ford's mind.

"Were you looking for me at the school-room just now?"

"No, sir."

"You did n't look in at the window to see if I was there?" continued the master.

“No, sir.”

The master glanced at Rupert. Truth-telling was a part of Rupert's truculent temper, although, as the boy had often bitterly remarked, it had always “told agin' him.”

“All right,” said the master, perfectly convinced. “It must have been my fancy; but I thought somebody looked in — or passed by the window.”

But here Johnny, who had overheard the dialogue and approached them, suddenly threw himself upon his brother's unoffending legs and commenced to beat and pull them about with unintelligible protests. Rupert, without looking down, said quietly, “Quit that now — I won't, I tell ye,” and went through certain automatic movements of dislodging Johnny as if he were a mere impeding puppy.

“What's the matter, Johnny?” said the master, to whom these gyrations were not unfamiliar.

Johnny only replied by a new grip of his brother's trousers.

“Well, sir,” said Rupert, slightly recovering his dimples and his readiness, “Johnny, yer, wants me to tell ye something. Ef he

was n't the most original self-cocking, God-forsaken liar in Injin Spring — ef he did n't lie awake in his crib mornin's to invent lies fer the day, I would n't mind tellin' ye, and would hev told you before. However, since you ask, and since you think you saw somebody around the school-house, Johnny yer allows that Seth Davis is spyin' round and followin' ye wherever you go, and he dragged me down yer to see it. He says he saw him doggin' ye."

"With a knife and pithtolth," added Johnny's boundless imagination, to the detriment of his limited facts.

Mr. Ford looked keenly from the one to the other, but rather with a suspicion that they were cognizant of his late fracas than belief in the truth of Johnny's statement.

"And what do *you* think of it, Rupert?" he asked carelessly.

"I think, sir," said Rupert, "that allowin' — for onct — that Johnny ain't lying, mebbe it 's Cressy McKinstry that Seth 's huntin' round, and knowin' that she 's always runnin' after you" — he stopped, and reddening with a newborn sense that his fatal truthfulness had led him into a glaring indelicacy towards the master, hurriedly

added: "I mean, sir, that mebbe it's Uncle Ben he's jealous of, now that he's got rich enough for Cressy to hev him, and knowin' he comes to school in the afternoon perhaps" —

"'T ain't either!" broke in Johnny promptly. "Theth's over ther beyond the thehool, and Crethy's eatin' ithecream at the bakerth with Uncle Ben."

"Well, suppose she is, Seth don't know it, silly!" answered Rupert, sharply. Then more politely to the master: "That's it! Seth has seen Uncle Ben gallivanting with Cressy and thinks he's bringing her over yer. Don't you see?"

The master however did not see but one thing. The girl who had only two days ago carelessly left it to him to explain a compromising situation to her mother — this girl who had precipitated him into a frontier fight to the peril of his position and her good name, was calmly eating ices with an available suitor without the least concern of the past! The connection was perhaps illogical, but it was unpleasant. It was the more awkward from the fact that he fancied that not only Rupert's beautiful eyes, but even the infant Johnny's round ones, were

fixed upon him with an embarrassed expression of hesitating and foreboding sympathy.

"I think Johnny believes what he says — don't you, Johnny?" he smiled with an assumption of cheerful ease, "but I see no necessity just yet for binding Seth Davis over to keep the peace. Tell me about yourself, Rupe. I hope Uncle Ben does n't think of changing his young tutor with his good fortune?"

"No, sir," returned Rupert brightening; "he promises to take me to Sacramento with him as his private secretary or confidential clerk, you know, ef — ef" — he hesitated again with very un-Rupert-like caution, "ef things go as he wants 'em." He stopped awkwardly and his brown eyes became clouded. "Like ez not, Mr. Ford, he's only foolin' me — and — *himself*." The boy's eyes sought the master's curiously.

"I don't know about that," returned Mr. Ford uneasily, with a certain recollection of Uncle Ben's triumph over his own incredulity; "he surely has n't shown himself a fool or a boaster so far. I consider your prospect a very fair one, and I wish you joy of it, my boy." He ran his fingers through Rupert's curls in his old caressing fashion,

the more tenderly perhaps that he fancied he still saw symptoms of stormy and wet weather in the boy's brown eyes. "Run along home, both of you, and don't worry yourselves about me."

He turned away, but had scarcely proceeded half a dozen yards before he felt a tug at his coat. Looking down he saw the diminutive Johnny. "They 'll be comin' home thith way," he said, reaching up in a hoarse confidential whisper.

"Who?"

"Crethy and 'im."

But before the master could make any response to this presumably gratifying information, Johnny had rejoined his brother. The two boys waved their hands towards him with the same diffident and mysterious sympathy that left him hesitating between a smile and a frown. Then he proceeded on his way. Nevertheless, for no other reason than that he felt a sudden distaste to meeting any one, when he reached the point where the trail descended directly to the settlement, he turned into a longer and more solitary detour by the woods.

The sun was already so low that its long rays pierced the forest from beneath, and

suffused the dim colonnade of straight pine shafts with a golden haze, while it left the dense intercrossed branches fifty feet above in deeper shadow. Walking in this yellow twilight, with his feet noiselessly treading down the yielding carpet of pine needles, it seemed to the master that he was passing through the woods in a dream. There was no sound but the dull intermittent double knock of the wood-pecker, or the drowsy croak of some early roosting bird; all suggestion of the settlement, with all traces of human contiguity, were left far behind. It was therefore with a strange and nervous sense of being softly hailed by some woodland sprite that he seemed to hear his own name faintly wafted upon the air. He turned quickly; it was Cressy, panting behind him! Even then, in her white closely gathered skirts, her bared head and graceful arching neck bent forward, her flying braids freed from the straw hat which she had swung from her arm so as not to impede her flight, there was so much of the following Mænad about her that he was for an instant startled.

He stopped; she bounded to him, and throwing her arms around his neck with a

light laugh, let herself hang for a moment breathless on his breast. Then recovering her speech she said slowly: —

“I started on an Injin trot after you, just as you turned off the trail, but you ’d got so far ahead while I was shaking myself clear of Uncle Ben that I had to jist lope the whole way through the woods to catch up.” She stopped, and looking up into his troubled face caught his cheeks between her hands, and bringing his knit brows down to the level of her humid blue eyes said, “You haven’t kissed me yet. What’s the matter?”

“Does n’t it strike you that *I* might ask that question, considering that it ’s three days since I ’ve seen you, and that you left me, in a rather awkward position, to explain matters to your mother?” he said coldly. He had formulated the sentence in his mind some moments before, but now that it was uttered, it appeared singularly weak and impotent.

“That ’s so,” she said with a frank laugh, burying her face in his waistcoat. “You see, dandy boy” — his pet name — “I reckoned for that reason we ’d better lie low for a day or two. Well,” she continued, unty-

ing his cravat and retying it again, "how *did* you crawl out of it?"

"Do you mean to say your mother did not tell you?" he asked indignantly.

"Why should she?" returned Cressy lazily. "She never talks to me of these things, honey."

"And you knew nothing about it?"

Cressy shook her head, and then winding one of her long braids around the young man's neck, offered the end of it to his mouth, and on his sternly declining it, took it in her own.

Yet even her ignorance of what had really happened did not account to the master for the indifference of her long silence, and albeit conscious of some inefficiency in his present unheroic attitude, he continued sarcastically, "May I ask *what* you imagined would happen when you left me?"

"Well," said Cressy confidently, "I reckoned, chile, you could lie as well as the next man, and that, being gifted, you'd sling Maw something new and purty. Why, *I* ain't got no fancy, but I fixed up something against Paw's questioning *me*. I made that conceited Masters promise to swear that *he* was in the barn with me. Then I calculated

to tell Paw that you came meandering along just before Maw popped in, and that I ske-daddled to join Masters. Of course," she added quickly, tightening her hold of the master as he made a sudden attempt at withdrawal, "I did n't let on to Masters *why* I wanted him to promise, or that you were there."

"Cressy," said Ford, irritated beyond measure, "are you mad, or do you think I am?"

The girl's face changed. She cast a half frightened, half questioning glance at his eyes and then around the darkening aisle. "If we're going to quarrel, Jack," she said hurriedly, "don't let's do it *before folks*."

"In the name of Heaven," he said, following her eyes indignantly, "what do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, with a slight shiver of resignation and scorn, "if you — oh dear! if *it's all* going to be like *them*, let's keep it to ourselves."

He gazed at her in hopeless bewilderment. Did she really mean that she was more frightened at the possible revelation of their disagreement than of their intimacy?

"Come," she continued tenderly, still glancing, however, uneasily around her, "come!

We'll be more comfortable in the hollow. It's only a step." Still holding him by her braid she half led, half dragged him away. To the right was one of those sudden depressions in the ground caused by the subsidence of the earth from hidden springs and the uprooting of one or two of the larger trees. When she had forced him down this declivity below the level of the needle-strewn forest floor, she seated him upon a mossy root, and shaking out her skirts in a half childlike, half coquettish way, comfortably seated herself in his lap, with her arm supplementing the clinging braid around his neck.

"Now hark to me, and don't holler so loud," she said turning his face to her questioning eyes. "What's gone of you anyway, nigger boy?" It should be premised that Cressy's terms of endearment were mainly negro-dialectical, reminiscences of her brief babyhood, her slave-nurse, and the only playmates she had ever known.

Still implacable, the master coldly repeated the counts of his indictment against the girl's strange indifference and still stranger entanglements, winding up by setting forth the whole story of his interview with her mother, his forced defence of the barn,

Seth's outspoken accusation, and their silent and furious struggle in the loft. But if he had expected that this daughter of a South-western fighter would betray any enthusiasm over her lover's participation in one of their characteristic feuds — if he looked for any fond praise for his own prowess, he was bitterly mistaken. She loosened her arm from his neck of her own accord, unwound the braid, and putting her two little hands clasped between her knees, crossed her small feet before her, and, albeit still in his lap, looked the picture of languid dejection.

"Maw ought to have more sense, and you ought to have lit out of the window after me," she said with a lazy sigh. "Fightin' ain't in your line — it's too much like *them*. That Seth's sure to get even with you."

"I can protect myself," he said haughtily. Nevertheless he had a depressing consciousness that his lithe and graceful burden was somewhat in the way of any heroic expression.

"Seth can lick you out of your boots, chile," she said with naive abstraction. Then, as he struggled to secure an upright position, "Don't git riled, honey. Of course *you'd* let them kill you before you'd give

in. But that's their best holt — that's their trade! That's all they can do — don't you see? That's where *you're* not like *them* — that's why you're not their low down kind! That's why you're my boy — that's why I love you!"

She had thrown her whole weight again upon his shoulders until she had forced him back to his seat. Then, with her locked hands again around his neck, she looked intently into his face. The varying color dropped from her cheeks, her eyes seemed to grow larger, the same look of rapt absorption and possession that had so transfigured her young face at the ball was fixed upon it now. Her lips parted slightly, she seemed to murmur rather than speak: —

"What are these people to us? What are Seth's jealousies, Uncle Ben's and Masters's foolishness, Paw and Maw's quarr'ls and tantrums to you and me, dear? What is it what *they* think, what they reckon, what they plan out, and what they set themselves against — to us? We love each other, we belong to each other, without their help or their hindrance. From the time we first saw each other it was so, and from that time Paw and Maw, and Seth and Masters,

and even *you* and *me*, dear, had nothing else to do. That was love as I know it; not Seth's sneaking rages, and Uncle Ben's sneaking fooleries, and Masters's sneaking conceit, but only love. And knowing that, I let Seth rage, and Uncle Ben dawdle, and Masters trifle — and for what? To keep them from me and my boy. They were satisfied, and we were happy."

Vague and unreasoning as he knew her speech to be, the rapt and perfect conviction with which it was uttered staggered him.

"But how is this to end, Cressy?" he said passionately.

The abstracted look passed, and the slight color and delicate mobility of her face returned. "To end, dandy boy?" she repeated lazily. "You did n't think of marrying me — did you?"

He blushed, stammered, and said "Yes," albeit with all his past vacillation and his present distrust of her, transparent on his cheek and audible in his voice.

"No, dear," she said quietly, reaching down, untying her little shoe and shaking the dust and pine needles from its recesses, "no! I don't know enough to be a wife to you, just now, and you know it. And I

could n't keep a house fit for you, and you could n't afford to keep *me* without it. And then it would be all known, and it would n't be us two, dear, and our lonely meetings any more. And we could n't be engaged — that would be too much like me and Seth over again. That's what you mean, dandy boy — for you're only a dandy boy, you know, and they don't get married to backwood Southern girls who have n't a nigger to bless themselves with since the war! No," she continued, lifting her proud little head so promptly after Ford had recovered from his surprise as to make the ruse of emptying her shoe perfectly palpable, "no, that's what we've both allowed, dear, all along. And now, honey, it's near time for me to go. Tell me something good — before I go. Tell me that you love me as you used to — tell me how you felt that night at the ball when you first knew we loved each other. But stop — kiss me first — there, once more — for keeps."

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Uncle Ben, or "Benjamin Daubigny, Esq.," as he was already known in the columns of the "Star," accompanied Miss Cressy McKinstry on her way home after the first display of attention and hospitality since his accession to wealth and position, he remained for some moments in a state of bewildered and smiling idiocy. It was true that their meeting was chance and accidental; it was true that Cressy had accepted his attention with lazy amusement; it was true that she had suddenly and audaciously left him on the borders of the McKinstry woods in a way that might have seemed rude and abrupt to any escort less invincibly good-humored than Uncle Ben, but none of these things marred his fatuous felicity. It is even probable that in his gratuitous belief that his timid attentions had been too marked and impulsive, he attributed Cressy's flight to a maidenly coyness that pleasurably increased his admira-

tion for her and his confidence in himself. In his abstraction of enjoyment and in the gathering darkness he ran against a fir-tree very much as he had done while walking with her, and he confusedly apologized to it as he had to her, and by her own appellation. In this way he eventually overran his trail and found himself unexpectedly and apologetically in the clearing before the school-house.

“Ef this ain’t the singlerest thing, miss,” he said, and then stopped suddenly. A faint noise in the school-house like the sound of splintered wood attracted his attention. The master was evidently there. If he was alone he would speak to him.

He went to the window, looked in, and in an instant his amiable abstraction left him. He crept softly to the door, tried it, and then putting his powerful shoulder against the panel, forced the lock from its fastenings. He entered the room as Seth Davis, frightened but furious, lifted himself from before the master’s desk which he had just broken open. He had barely time to conceal something in his pocket and close the lid again before Uncle Ben approached him.

“What mouut ye be doin’ here, Seth

Davis?" he asked with the slow deliberation which in that locality meant mischief.

"And what mount *you* be doin' here, Mister Ben Dabney?" said Seth, resuming his effrontery.

"Well," returned Uncle Ben, planting himself in the aisle before his opponent, "I ain't doin' no sheriff's *posse* business jest now, but I reckon to keep my hand in far enuff to purtect other folks' property," he added, with a significant glance at the broken lock of the desk.

"Ben Dabney," said Seth in snarling expostulation, "I hain't got no quar'll with ye!"

"Then hand me over whatever you took jest now from teacher's desk and we'll talk about that afterwards," said Uncle Ben advancing.

"I tell ye I hain't got no quar'll with ye, Uncle Ben," continued Seth, retreating with a malignant sneer; "and when you talk of protectin' other folks' property, mebbe ye'd better protect *your own* — or what ye'd like to call so — instead of quar'llin' with the man that's helpin' ye. I've got yer the proofs that that sneakin' hound of a Yankee school-master that Cress McKinstry's hell

bent on, and that the old man and old woman are just chuckin' into her arms, is a lyin', black-hearted, hypocritical seducer" —

"Stop!" said Uncle Ben in a voice that made the crazy casement rattle.

He strode towards Seth Davis, no longer with his habitual careful, hesitating step, but with a tread that seemed to shake the whole school-room. A single dominant clutch of his powerful right hand on the young man's breast forced him backwards into the vacant chair of the master. His usually florid face had grown as gray as the twilight; his menacing form in a moment filled the little room and darkened the windows. Then in some inexplicable reaction his figure slightly drooped, he laid one heavy hand tremblingly on the desk, and with the other affected to wipe his mouth after his old embarrassed fashion.

"What's that you were sayin' o' Cressy?" he said huskily.

"Wot everybody says," said the frightened Seth, gaining a cowardly confidence under his adversary's emotion. "Wot every cub that sets yer under his cantin' teachin', and sees 'em together, knows. It's wot you'd hev knowed ef he and Roop Filgee

had n't played ye fer a softy all the time. And while you've bin hangin' round yer fer a flicker of Cressy's gownd as she prances out o' school, he's bin lyin' low and laffin' at ye, and while he's turned Roop over to keep you here, pretendin' to give ye lessons, he's bin gallivantin' round with her and huggin' and kissin' her in barns and in the brush — and now *you* want to quar'll with me."

He stopped, panting for breath, and stared malignantly in the gray face of his hearer. But Uncle Ben only lifted his heavy hand mildly with an awkward gesture of warning, stepped softly in his old cautious hesitating manner to the open door, closed it, and returned gently: —

"I reckon ye got in through the winder, did n't ye, Seth?" he said, with a labored affectation of unemotional ease, "a kind o' one leg over, and one, two, and then you're in, eh?"

"Never you mind *how* I got in, Ben Dabney," returned Seth, his hostility and insolence increasing with his opponent's evident weakness, "ez long ez I got yer and got, by G — d! what I kem here fer! For whiles all this was goin' on, and whiles the old fool man and old fool woman was swallowin'

what they did see and blinkin' at what they did n't, and huggin' themselves that they'd got high-toned kempany fer their darter, that high-toned kempany was playin' *them* too, by G — d! Yes, sir! that high-toned, cantin' school-teacher was keepin' a married woman in 'Frisco, all the while he was here honey-foglin' with Cressy, and I've got the papers yer to prove it." He tapped his breast-pocket with a coarse laugh and thrust his face forward into the gray shadow of his adversary's.

"An' you sorter spotted their bein' in this yer desk and bursted it?" said Uncle Ben, gravely examining the broken lock in the darkness as if it were the most important feature of the incident.

Seth nodded. "You bet your life. I saw him through the winder only this afternoon lookin over 'em alone, and I reckoned to lay my hands on 'em if I had to bust him or his desk. And I did!" he added with a triumphant chuckle.

"And you did — sure pop!" said Uncle Ben with slow deliberate admiration, passing his heavy hand along the splintered lid. "And you reckon, Seth, that this yer showin' of him up will break off enythin' be-

twixt him and this yer — this yer Miss — Miss McKinstry?" he continued with labored formality.

"I reckon ef the old fool McKinstry don't shoot him in his tracks thar 'll be white men enough in Injin Springs to ride this high-toned, pizenous hypocrit on a rail outer the settlement!"

"That's so!" said Uncle Ben musingly, after a thoughtful pause, in which he still seemed to be more occupied with the broken desk than his companion's remark. Then he went on cautiously: "And ez this thing orter be worked mighty fine, Seth, p'r'aps, on the hull, you 'd better let me have them papers."

"What! *You?*" snarled Seth, drawing back with a glance of angry suspicion; "not if I know it!"

"Seth," said Uncle Ben, resting his elbows on the desk confidentially, and speaking with painful and heavy deliberation, "when you first interdoosed this yer subject you elluded to my hevin', so to speak, rights o' preëmption and interference with this young lady, and that in your opinion, I was n't purtectin' them rights. It 'pears to me that, allowin' that to be gospel truth, them ther papers

orter be in *my* possession — you hevin' so to speak no rights to purtect, bein' off the board with this yer young lady, and bein' moved gin'rally by free and independent cussedness. And ez I sed afore, this sort o' thing havin' to be worked mighty fine, and them papers manniperlated with judgment, I reckon, Seth, if you don't object, I'll hev — hev — to trouble you."

Seth started to his feet with a rapid glance at the door, but Uncle Ben had risen again with the same alarming expression of completely filling the darkened school-room, and of shaking the floor beneath him at the slightest movement. Already he fancied he saw Uncle Ben's powerful arm hovering above him ready to descend. It suddenly occurred to him that if he left the execution of his scheme of exposure and vengeance to Uncle Ben, the *onus* of stealing the letters would fall equally upon their possessor. This advantage seemed more probable than the danger of Uncle Ben's weakly yielding them up to the master. In the latter case he, Seth, could still circulate the report of having seen the letters which Uncle Ben had himself stolen in a fit of jealousy — a hypothesis the more readily accepted from the

latter's familiar knowledge of the school-house and his presumed ambitious jealousy of Cressy in his present attitude as a man of position. With affected reluctance and hesitation he put his hand to his breast-pocket.

"Of course," he said, "if you're kalki-latin' to take up the quar'll on *your* rights, and ez Cressy ain't anythin' more to me, *you* orter hev the proofs. Only don't trust them into that hound's hands. Once he gets 'em again he'll secure a warrant agin you for stealin'. That'll be his game. I'd show 'em to *her* first—don't ye see?—and I reckon ef she's old Ma'am McKinstry's darter, she'll make it lively for him."

He handed the letters to the looming figure before him. It seemed to become again a yielding mortal, and said in a hesitating voice, "P'r'aps you'd better make tracks outer this, Seth, and leave me yer to put things to rights and fix up that door and the desk agin to-morrow mornin'. He'd better not know it to onct, and so start a row about bein' broken into."

The proposition seemed to please Seth; he even extended his hand in the darkness. But he met only an irresponsive void. With a slight shrug of his shoulders and a grunt-

ing farewell, he felt his way to the door and disappeared. For a few moments it seemed as if Uncle Ben had also deserted the school-house, so profound and quiet was the hush that fell upon it. But as the eye became accustomed to the shadow a grayish bulk appeared to grow out of it over the master's desk and shaped itself into the broad figure of Uncle Ben. Later, when the moon rose and looked in at the window, it saw him as the master had seen him on the first day he had begun his lessons in the school-house, with his face bent forward over the desk and the same look of child-like perplexity and struggle that he had worn at his allotted task. Unheroic, ridiculous, and no doubt blundering and idiotic as then, but still vaguely persistent in his thought, he remained for some moments in this attitude. Then rising and taking advantage of the moonlight that flooded the desk, he set himself to mend the broken lock with a large mechanical clasp-knife he produced from his pocket, and the aid of his workmanlike thumb and finger. Presently he began to whistle softly, at first a little artificially and with relapses of reflective silence. The lock of the desk restored, he secured into position

again that part of the door-lock which he had burst off in his entrance. This done, he closed the door gently and once more stepped out into the moonlit clearing. In replacing his knife in his pocket he took out the letters which he had not touched since they were handed to him in the darkness. His first glance at the handwriting caused him to stop. Then still staring at it, he began to move slowly and automatically backwards to the porch. When he reached it he sat down, unfolded the letter, and without attempting to read it, turned its pages over and over with the unfamiliarity of an illiterate man in search of the signature. This when found apparently plunged him again into motionless abstraction. Only once he changed his position to pull up the legs of his trousers, open his knees, and extend the distance between his feet, and then with the unfolded pages carefully laid in the moonlit space thus opened before him, regarded them with dubious speculation. At the end of ten minutes he rose with a sigh of physical and mental relaxation, refolded the letter, put it in his pocket, and made his way to the town.

When he reached the hotel he turned into the bar-room, and observing that it happened

to be comparatively deserted, asked for a glass of whiskey. In response to the bar-keeper's glance of curiosity — as Uncle Ben seldom drank, and then only as a social function with others — he explained : —

“I reckon straight whiskey is about ez good ez the next thing for blind chills.”

The bar-keeper here interposed that in his larger medical experience he had found the exhibition of ginger in combination with gin attended with effect, although it was evident that in his business capacity he regarded Uncle Ben, as a drinker, with distrust.

“Ye ain't seen Mr. Ford hanging round yer lately?” continued Uncle Ben with laborious ease.

The bar-keeper, with his eye still scornfully fixed on his customer, but his hands which were engaged in washing his glasses under the counter giving him the air of humorously communicating with a hidden confederate, had not seen the school-master that afternoon.

Uncle Ben turned away and slowly mounted the staircase to the master's room. After a moment's pause on the landing, which must have been painfully obvious to any one who heard his heavy ascent, he gave

two timid raps on the door which were equally ridiculous in contrast with his powerful tread. The door was opened promptly by the master.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said shortly. "Come in."

Uncle Ben entered without noticing the somewhat ungracious form of invitation. "It war me," he said, "dropped in, not finding ye downstairs. Let's have a drink."

The master gazed at Uncle Ben, who, owing to his abstraction, had not yet wiped his mouth of the liquor he had imperfectly swallowed, and was in consequence more redolent of whiskey than a confirmed toper. He rang the bell for the desired refreshment with a slightly cynical smile. He was satisfied that his visitor, like many others of humble position, was succumbing to his good fortune.

"I wanted to see ye, Mr. Ford," he began, taking an unproffered chair and depositing his hat after some hesitation outside the door, "in regard to what I onct told ye about my wife in Mizzouri. P'r'aps you disremember?"

"I remember," returned the master resignedly.

"You know it was that arternoon that fool Stacey sent the sheriff and the Harrisons over to McKinsty's barn."

"Go on!" petulantly said the master, who had his own reasons for not caring to recall it.

"It was that arternoon, you know, that you had n't time to hark to me — hevin' to go off on an engagement," continued Uncle Ben with protracted deliberation, "and" —

"Yes, yes, I remember," interrupted the master exasperatedly, "and really unless you get on faster, I'll have to leave you again."

"It was that arternoon," said Uncle Ben without heeding him, "when I told you I had n't any idea what had become o' my wife ez I left in Mizzouri."

"Yes," said the master sharply, "and I told you it was your bounden duty to look for her."

"That's so," said Uncle Ben nodding comfortably, "them's your very words; on'y a leetle more strong than that, ef I don't disremember. Well, I reckon I've got an idee!" The master assumed a sudden expression of interest, but Uncle Ben did not vary his monotonous tone.

"I kem across that idee, so to speak, on

the trail. I kem across it in some letters ez was lying wide open in the brush. I picked 'em up and I 've got 'em here."

He slowly took the letters from his pocket with one hand, while he dragged the chair on which he was sitting beside the master. But with a quick flush of indignation Mr. Ford rose and extended his hand.

"These are *my* letters, Dabney," he said sternly, "stolen from my desk. Who has dared to do this?"

But Uncle Ben had, as if accidentally, interposed his elbow between the master and Seth's spoils.

"Then it 's all right?" he returned deliberately. "I brought 'em here because I thought they might give an idee where my wife was. For them letters is in her own handwrite. You remember ez I told ez how she was a scollard."

The master sat back in his chair white and dumb. Incredible, extraordinary, and utterly unlooked for as was this revelation, he felt instinctively that it was true.

"I could n't read it myself — ez you know. I did n't keer to ax any one else to read it for me — you kin reckon why, too. And that 's why I 'm troublin' you to-night, Mr. Ford — ez a friend."

The master with a desperate effort recovered his voice. "It is impossible. The lady who wrote those letters does not bear your name. More than that," he added with hasty irrelevance, "she is so free that she is about to be married, as you might have read. You have made a mistake; the handwriting may be like, but it cannot be really your wife's."

Uncle Ben shook his head slowly. "It's her'n — there's no mistake. When a man, Mr. Ford, hez studied that handwrite — havin', so to speak, knowed it on'y from the *outside* — from seein' it passin' like between friends — that man's chances o' bein' mistook ain't ez great ez the man's who on'y takes in the sense of the words that might b'long to everybody. And her name not bein' the same ez mine, don't foller. Ef she got a divorce she'd take her old gal's name — the name of her fammerly. And that would seem to allow she *did* get a divorce. What mowt she hev called herself when she writ this?"

The master saw his opportunity and rose to it with a chivalrous indignation, that for the moment imposed even upon himself. "I decline to answer that question," he said

angrily. "I refuse to allow the name of any woman who honors me with her confidence to be dragged into the infamous outrage that has been committed upon me and common decency. And I shall hold the thief and scoundrel — whoever he may be — answerable to myself in the absence of her natural protector."

Uncle Ben surveyed the hero of these glittering generalities with undisguised admiration. He extended his hand to him gravely.

"Shake! Ef another proof was wantin', Mr. Ford, of that bein' my wife's letter," he said, "that high-toned style of yours would settle it. For, ef thar was one thing she *did* like, it was that sort of po'try. And one reason why her and me did n't get on, and why I skedaddled, was because it was n't in my line. Et's all in trainin'! On'y a man ez had the Fourth Reader at his fingers' ends could talk like that. Bein' brought up on Dobell — ez is nowhere — it sorter lets me outer you, ez it did outer *her*. But allowin' it ain't the square thing for *you* to mention her name, that would n't be nothin' agin' *my* doin' it, and callin' her, well — Lou Price, in a keerless sort o' way, eh?"

"I decline to answer further," replied the master quickly, although his color had changed at the name. "I decline to say another word on the matter until this mystery is cleared up — until I know who dared to break into my desk and steal my property, and the purpose of this unheard-of outrage. And I demand possession of those letters at once."

Uncle Ben without a word put them in the master's hand, to his slight surprise, and it must be added to his faint discomfiture, nor was it decreased when Uncle Ben added, with grave *naïveté* and a patronizing pressure of his hand on his shoulder, — "In course ez you 're taken' it on to yourself, and ez Lou Price ain't got no further call on *me*, they orter be yours. Ez to who got 'em outer the desk, I reckon you ain't got no suspicion of any one spyin' round ye — hev ye?"

In an instant the recollection of Seth Davis's face at the window and the corroboration of Rupert's warning flashed across Ford's mind. The hypothesis that Seth had imagined that they were Cressy's letters, and had thrown them down without reading them when he had found out his

mistake, seemed natural. For if he had read them he would undoubtedly have kept them to show to Cressy. The complex emotions that had disturbed the master on the discovery of Uncle Ben's relationship to the writer of the letters were resolving themselves into a furious rage at Seth. But before he dared revenge himself he must be first assured that Seth was ignorant of their contents. He turned to Uncle Ben.

"I have a suspicion, but to make it certain I must ask you for the present to say nothing of this to any one."

Uncle Ben nodded. "And when you hev found out and you're settled in your mind that you kin make *my* mind easy about this yer Lou Price, ez we'll call her, bein' divorced squarely, and bein', so to speak, in the way o' gettin' married agin, ye might let me know—ez a friend. I reckon I won't trouble you any more to-night—unless you and me takes another sociable drink together in the bar. No? Well, then, good-night." He moved slowly towards the door. With his hand on the lock he added: "Ef yer writin' to her agin, you might say ez how you found *me* lookin' well and comf'able, and hopin' she's enjyin' the same blessin'. 'So long."

He disappeared, leaving the master in a hopeless collapse of conflicting, and, it is to be feared, not very heroic emotions. The situation, which had begun so dramatically, had become suddenly unromantically ludicrous, without, however, losing any of its embarrassing quality. He was conscious that he occupied the singular position of being more ridiculous than the husband — whose invincible and complacent simplicity stung him like the most exquisite irony. For an instant he was almost goaded into the fury of declaring that he had broken off from the writer of the letters forever, but its inconsistency with the chivalrous attitude he had just taken occurred to him in time to prevent him from becoming doubly absurd. His rage with Seth Davis seemed to him the only feeling left that was genuine and rational, and yet, now that Uncle Ben had gone, even that had a spurious ring. It was necessary for him to lash himself into a fury over the hypothesis that the letters *might* have been Cressy's, and desecrated by that scoundrel's touch. Perhaps he had read them and left them to be picked up by others. He looked over them carefully to see if their meaning would, to the ordinary

reader, appear obvious and compromising. His eye fell on the first paragraph.

“I should not be quite fair with you, Jack, if I affected to disbelieve in your faith in your love for me and its endurance, but I should be still more unfair if I did n’t tell you what I honestly believe, that at your age you are apt to deceive yourself, and, without knowing it, to deceive others. You confess you have not yet decided upon your career, and you are always looking forward so hopefully, dear Jack, for a change in the future, but you are willing to believe that far more serious things than that will suffer no change in the mean time. If we continued as we were, I, who am older than you and have more experience, might learn the misery of seeing you change towards *me* as I have changed towards another, and for the same reason. If I were sure I could keep pace with you in your dreams and your ambition, if I were sure that I always knew *what* they were, we might still be happy — but I am not sure, and I dare not again risk my happiness on an uncertainty. In coming to my present resolution I do not look for happiness, but at least I know I shall not suffer disappointment, nor in-

volve others in it. I confess I am growing too old not to feel the value to a woman — a necessity to her in this country — of security in her present and future position. Another can give me that. And although you may call this a selfish view of our relations, I believe that you will soon — if you do not, even as you read this now — feel the justice of it, and thank me for taking it.”

With a smile of scorn he tore up the letter, in what he fondly believed was the bitterness of an outraged trustful nature, forgetting that for many weeks he had scarcely thought of its writer, and that he himself in his conduct had already anticipated its truths.

CHAPTER XII.

THE master awoke the next morning, albeit after a restless night, with that clarity of conscience and perception which it is to be feared is more often the consequence of youth and a perfect circulation than of any moral conviction or integrity. He argued with himself that as the only party really aggrieved in the incident of the previous night, the right of remedy remained with him solely, and under the benign influence of an early breakfast and the fresh morning air he was inclined to feel less sternly even towards Seth Davis. In any event, he must first carefully weigh the evidence against him, and examine the scene of the outrage closely. For this purpose, he had started for the school-house fully an hour before his usual time. He was even light-hearted enough to recognize the humorous aspect of Uncle Ben's appeal to him, and his own ludicrously paradoxical attitude, and as he at last passed from the dreary flat into the

fringe of upland pines, he was smiling. Well for him, perhaps, that he was no more affected by any premonition of the day before him than the lately awakened birds that lightly cut the still sleeping woods around him in their long flashing sabre-curves of flight. A yellow-throat, destined to become the breakfast of a lazy hawk still swinging above the river, was especially moved to such a causeless and idiotic *roulade* of mirth that the master listening to the foolish bird was fain to whistle too. He presently stopped, however, with a slight embarrassment. For a few paces before him Cressy had unexpectedly appeared.

She had evidently been watching for him. But not with her usual indolent confidence. There was a strained look of the muscles of her mouth, as of some past repression, and a shaded hollow under her temples beneath the blonde rings of her shorter hair. Her habitually slow, steady eye was troubled, and she cast a furtive glance around her before she searched him with her glance. Without knowing why, yet vaguely fearing that he did, he became still more embarrassed, and in the very egotism of awkwardness, stammered without a further salutation: "A dis-

graceful thing has happened last night, and I'm up early to find the perpetrator. My desk was broken into, and " —

" I know it," she interrupted, with a half-impatient, half uneasy putting away of the subject with her little hand — " there — don't go all over it again. Paw and Maw have been at me about it all night — ever since those Harrisons in their anxiousness to make up their quarrel, rushed over with the news. I'm tired of it!"

For an instant he was staggered. How much had she learned! With the same awkward indirectness, he said vaguely, " But it might have been *your* letters, you know?"

" But it was n't," she said, simply. " It *ought* to have been. I wish it had " — She stopped, and again regarded him with a strange expression. " Well," she said slowly, " what are you going to do?"

" To find out the scoundrel who has done this," he said firmly, " and punish him as he deserves."

The almost imperceptible shrug that had raised her shoulders gave way as she regarded him with a look of wearied compassion.

" No," she said, gravely, " you cannot.

They're too many for you. You must go away, at once."

"Never," he said indignantly. "Even if it were not a cowardice. It would be more — a confession!"

"Not more than they already know," she said wearily. "But, I tell you, you *must* go. I have sneaked out of the house and run here all the way to warn you. If you — you care for me, Jack — you will go."

"I should be a traitor to you if I did," he said quickly. "I shall stay."

"But if — if — Jack — if" — she drew nearer him with a new-found timidity, and then suddenly placed her two hands upon his shoulders: "If — if — Jack — *I* were to go with you?"

The old rapt, eager look of possession had come back to her face now; her lips were softly parted. Yet even then she seemed to be waiting some reply more potent than that syllabled on the lips of the man before her.

Howbeit that was the only response. "Darling," he said kissing her, "but would n't that justify them" —

"Stop," she said suddenly. Then putting her hand over his mouth, she continued with the same half-weary expression: "Don't let

us go over all that again either. It is so tiresome. Listen, dear. You'll do one or two little things for me — won't you, dandy boy? Don't linger long at the school-house after lessons. Go right home! Don't look after these men *to-day* — to-morrow, Saturday, is your holiday — you know — and you'll have more time. Keep to yourself to-day as much as you can, dear, for twelve hours — until — until — you hear from me, you know. It will be all right then," she added, lifting her eyelids with a sudden odd resemblance to her father's look of drowsy pain, which Ford had never noticed before. "Promise me that, dear, won't you?"

With a mental reservation he promised hurriedly — preoccupied in his wonder why she seemed to avoid his explanation, in his desire to know what had happened, in the pride that had kept him from asking more or volunteering a defence, and in his still haunting sense of having been wronged. Yet he could not help saying as he caught and held her hand : —

"*You* have not doubted me, Cressy? *You* have not allowed this infamous raking up of things that are past and gone to alter your feelings?"

She looked at him abstractedly. "You think it might alter *anybody's* feelings, then?"

"Nobody's who really loved another" — he stammered.

"Don't let us talk of it any more," she said suddenly stretching out her arms, lifting them above her head with a wearied gesture, and then letting them fall clasped before her in her old habitual fashion. "It makes my head ache; what with Paw and Maw and the rest of them — I'm sick of it all."

She turned away as Ford drew back coldly and let her hand fall from his arm. She took a few steps forward, stopped, ran back to him again, crushed his face and head in a close embrace, and then seemed to dip like a bird into the tall bracken, and was gone.

The master stood for some moments chagrined and bewildered; it was characteristic of his temperament that he had paid less heed to what she told him than what he *imagined* had passed between her mother and herself. She was naturally jealous of the letters — he could forgive her for that; she had doubtless been twitted about them, but he could easily explain them to her parents — as he would have done to her. But

he was not such a fool as to elope with her at such a moment, without first clearing his character — and knowing more of hers. And it was equally characteristic of him that in his sense of injury he confounded her with the writer of the letters — as sympathizing with his correspondent in her estimate of his character, and was quite carried away with the belief that he was equally wronged by both.

It was not until he reached the school-house that the evidences of last night's outrage for a time distracted his mind from his singular interview. He was struck with the workmanlike manner in which the locks had been restored, and the care that had evidently been taken to remove the more obvious and brutal traces of burglary. This somewhat staggered his theory that Seth Davis was the perpetrator; mechanical skill and thoughtfulness were not among the lout's characteristics. But he was still more disconcerted on pushing back his chair to find a small india-rubber tobacco pouch lying beneath it. The master instantly recognized it: he had seen it a hundred times before — it was Uncle Ben's. It was not there when he had closed the room yester-

day afternoon. Either Uncle Ben had been there last night, or had anticipated him this morning. But in the latter case he would scarcely have overlooked his fallen property — that, in the darkness of the night, might have readily escaped detection. His brow darkened with a sudden conviction that it was Uncle Ben who was the real and only offender, and that his simplicity of the previous night was part of his deception. A sickening sense that he had been again duped — but why or to what purpose he hardly dared to think — overcame him. Who among these strange people could he ever again trust? After the fashion of more elevated individuals, he had accepted the respect and kindness of those he believed his inferiors as a natural tribute to his own superiority; any change in *their* feelings must therefore be hypocrisy or disloyalty; it never occurred to him that *he* might have fallen below their standard.

The arrival of the children and the resumption of his duties for a time diverted him. But although the morning's exercise restored the master's self-confidence, it cannot be said to have improved his judgment. Disdaining to question Rupert Filgee, as the possi-

ble confidant of Uncle Ben, he answered the curious inquiries of the children as to the broken doorlock with the remark that it was a matter that he should have to bring before the Trustees of the Board, and by the time that school was over and the pupils dismissed he had quite resolved upon this formal disposition of it. In spite of Cressy's warning — rather because of it — in the new attitude he had taken towards her and her friends, he lingered in the school-house until late. He had occupied himself in drawing up a statement of the facts, with an intimation that his continuance in the school would depend upon a rigid investigation of the circumstances, when he was aroused by the clatter of horses' hoofs. The next moment the school-house was surrounded by a dozen men.

He looked up; half of them dismounted and entered the room. The other half remained outside darkening the windows with their motionless figures. Each man carried a gun before him on the saddle; each man wore a rude mask of black cloth partly covering his face.

Although the master was instinctively aware that he was threatened by serious dan-

ger, he was far from being impressed by the arms and disguise of his mysterious intruders. On the contrary, the obvious and glaring inconsistency of this cheaply theatrical invasion of the peaceful school-house; of this opposition of menacing figures to the scattered childish primers and text-books that still lay on the desks around him, only extracted from him a half scornful smile as he coolly regarded them. The fearlessness of ignorance is often as unassailable as the most experienced valor, and the awe-inspiring invaders were at first embarrassed and then humanly angry. A lank figure to the right made a forward movement of impotent rage, but was checked by the evident leader of the party.

"Ef he likes to take it that way, there ain't no Regulators law agin it, I reckon," he said, in a voice which the master instantly recognized as Jim Harrison's, "though ez a gin'ral thing they don't usually find it *fun*." Then turning to the master he added, "Mister Ford, ef that 's the name you go by everywhere, we 're wantin' a man about your size."

Ford knew that he was in hopeless peril. He knew that he was physically defenceless

and at the mercy of twelve armed and lawless men. But he retained a preternatural clearness of perception, and audacity born of unqualified scorn for his antagonists, with a feminine sharpness of tongue. In a voice which astonished even himself by its contemptuous distinctness, he said: "My name is Ford, but as I only *suppose* your name is Harrison perhaps you'll be fair enough to take that rag from your face and show it to me like a man."

The man removed the mask from his face with a slight laugh.

"Thank you," said Ford. "Now, perhaps you will tell me which one of you gentlemen broke into the school-house, forced the lock of my desk, and stole my papers. If he is here I wish to tell him he is not only a thief, but a cur and a coward, for the letters are a woman's—whom he neither knows nor has the right to know."

If he had hoped to force a personal quarrel and trust his life to the chance of a single antagonist, he was disappointed, for although his unexpected attitude had produced some effect among the group, and even attracted the attention of the men at the windows, Harrison strode deliberately towards him.

"That kin wait," he said; "jest now we propose to take you and your letters and drop 'em and you outer this yer township of Injin Springs. You kin take 'em back to the woman or critter you got 'em of. But we kalkilate you 're a little too handy and free in them sorter things to teach school round yer, and we kinder allow we don't keer to hev our gals and boys eddicated up to your high-toned standard. So ef you choose to kem along easy we 'll mak' you comf'ble on a hoss we 've got waitin' outside, an' escort you across the line. Ef you don't — we 'll take you anyway."

The master cast a rapid glance around him. In his quickness of perception he had already noted that the led horse among the cavalcade was fastened by a *lariat* to one of the riders so that escape by flight was impossible, and that he had not a single weapon to defend himself with or even provoke, in his desperation, the struggle that could forestall ignominy by death. Nothing was left him but his voice, clear and trenchant as he faced them.

"You are twelve to one," he said calmly, "but if there is a single man among you who dare step forward and accuse me of

what you only *together* dare do, I will tell him he is a liar and a coward, and stand here ready to make it good against him. You come here as judge and jury condemning me without trial, and confronting me with no accusers ; you come here as lawless avengers of your honor, and you dare not give *me* the privilege of as lawlessly defending my own."

There was another slight murmur among the men, but the leader moved impatiently forward. "We 've had enough o' your preachin' : we want *you*," he said roughly. "Come."

"Stop," said a dull voice.

It came from a mute figure which had remained motionless among the others. Every eye was turned upon it as it rose and lazily pushed the cloth from its face.

"Hiram McKinstry!" said the others in mingled tones of astonishment and suspicion.

"That 's me !" said McKinstry, coming forward with heavy deliberation. "I joined this yer delegation at the cross-roads instead o' my brother, who had the call. I reckon et 's all the same — or mebbe better. For I perpose to take this yer gentleman off your hands."

He lifted his slumbrous eyes for the first time to the master, and at the same time put himself between him and Harrison. "I perpose," he continued, "to take him at his word; I perpose ter give him a chance to answer with a gun. And ez I reckon, by all accounts, there 's no man yer ez hez a better right than *me*, I perpose to be the man to put that question to him in the same way. Et may not suit some gents," he continued slowly, facing an angry exclamation from the lank figure behind him, "ez would prefer to hev eleven men to take up *their* private quo'lls, but even then I reckon that the man who is the most injured hez the right to the first say and that man's *me*."

With a careful deliberation that had a double significance to the malcontents, he handed his own rifle to the master and without looking at him continued: "I reckon, sir, you've seen that afore, but ef it ain't quite to your hand, any of those gents, I kalkilate, will be high-toned enuff to giv you the chyce o' theirs. And there 's no need o' trapsin' beyon' the township lines, to fix this yer affair; I perpose to do it in ten minutes in the brush yonder."

Whatever might have been the feelings

and intentions of the men around him, the precedence of McKinstry's right to the duello was a principle too deeply rooted in their traditions to deny; if any resistance to it had been contemplated by some of them, the fact that the master was now armed, and that Mr. McKinstry would quickly do battle at his side with a revolver in defence of his rights, checked any expression. They silently drew back as the master and McKinstry slowly passed out of the school-house together, and then followed in their rear. In that interval the master turned to McKinstry and said in a low voice: "I accept your challenge and thank you for it. You have never done me a greater kindness — whatever I have done to *you* — yet I want you to believe that neither now nor *then* — I meant you any harm."

"Ef you mean by that, sir, that ye reckon ye won't return my fire, ye're blind and wrong. For it will do you no good with them," he said with a significant wave of his crippled hand towards the following crowd, "nor me neither."

Firmly resolved, however, that he would not fire at McKinstry, and clinging blindly to this which he believed was the last idea

of his foolish life, he continued on without another word until they reached the open strip of *chemisal* that flanked the clearing.

The rude preliminaries were soon settled. The parties armed with rifles were to fire at the word from a distance of eighty yards, and then approach each other, continuing the fight with revolvers until one or the other fell. The selection of seconds was effected by the elder Harrison acting for McKinstry, and after a moment's delay by the volunteering of the long, lank figure previously noted to act for the master. Preoccupied by other thoughts, Mr. Ford paid little heed to his self-elected supporter, who to the others seemed to be only taking that method of showing his contempt for McKinstry's recent insult. The master received the rifle mechanically from his hand and walked to position. He noticed, however, and remembered afterwards that his second was half hidden by the trunk of a large pine to his right that marked the limit of the ground.

In that supreme moment it must be recorded, albeit against all preconceived theory, that he did *not* review his past life, was *not* illuminated by a flash of remorseful or sentimental memory, and did *not* commend his

soul to his Maker, but that he was simply and keenly alive to the very actual present in which he still existed and to his one idea of not firing at his adversary. And if anything could render his conduct more theoretically incorrect it was a certain exalted sense that he was doing quite right and was not only *not* a bad sort of fellow, but one whom his survivors might possibly regret!

“Are you ready, gentlemen? One — two — three — fi . . . !”

The explosions were singularly simultaneous — so remarkable in fact that it seemed to the master that his rifle, fired in the air, had given a *double* report. A light wreath of smoke lay between him and his opponent. He was unhurt — so evidently was his adversary, for the voice rose again.

“Advance! . . . Hallo there! Stop!”

He looked up quickly to see McKinsty stagger and then fall heavily to the ground.

With an exclamation of horror, the first and only terrible emotion he had felt, he ran to the fallen man, as Harrison reached his side at the same moment.

“For God’s sake,” he said wildly, throwing himself on his knees beside McKinsty, “what has happened? For I swear to you,

I never aimed at you! I fired in the air. Speak! Tell him, you," he turned with a despairing appeal to Harrison, "you must have seen it all — tell him it was not me!"

A half wondering, half incredulous smile passed quickly over Harrison's face. "In course you did n't *mean* it," he said dryly, "but let that slide. Get up and get away from yer, while you kin," he added impatiently, with a significant glance at one or two men who lingered after the sudden and general dispersion of the crowd at McKinstry's fall. "Get — will ye!"

"Never!" said the young man passionately, "until he knows that it was not my hand that fired that shot."

McKinstry painfully struggled to his elbow. "It took me yere," he said with a slow deliberation, as if answering some previous question, and pointing to his hip, "and it kinder let me down when I started forward at the second call."

"But it was not I who did it, McKinstry, I swear it. Hear me! For God's sake, say you believe me."

McKinstry turned his drowsy troubled eyes upon the master as if he were vaguely recalling something. "Stand back thar a

minit, will ye," he said to Harrison, with a languid wave of his crippled hand ; " I want ter speak to this yer man."

Harrison drew back a few paces and the master sought to take the wounded man's hand, but he was stopped by a gesture. " Where hev you put Cressy ? " McKinstry said slowly.

" I don't understand you," stammered Ford.

" Where are you hidin' her from me ? " repeated McKinstry with painful distinctness. " Whar hev you run her to, that you 're reckonin' to jine her arter — arter — *this* ? "

" I am not hiding her ! I am not going to her ! I do not know where she is. I have not seen her since we parted early this morning without a word of meeting again," said the master rapidly, yet with a bewildered astonishment that was obvious even to the dulled faculties of his hearer.

" That war true ? " asked McKinstry, laying his hand upon the master's shoulder and bringing his dull eyes to the level of the young man's.

" It is the whole truth," said Ford fervently, " and true also that I never raised my hand against you."

McKinstry beckoned to Harrison and the two others who had joined him, and then sank partly back with his hand upon his side, where the slow empurpling of his red shirt showed the slight ooze of a deeply-seated wound.

“You fellers kin take me over to the ranch,” he said calmly, “and let him,” pointing to Ford, “ride your best hoss fer the doctor. I don’t,” he continued in grave explanation, “gin’rally use a doctor, but this yer is suthin’ outside the old woman’s regular gait.” He paused, and then drawing the master’s head down towards him, he added in his ear, “When I get to hev a look at the size and shape o’ this yer ball that’s in my hip, I’ll — I’ll — I’ll — be — a — little more kam!” A gleam of dull significance struggled into his eye. The master evidently understood him, for he rose quickly, ran to the horse, mounted him and dashed off for medical assistance, while McKinstry, closing his heavy lids, anticipated this looked-for calm by fainting gently away.

CHAPTER XIII.

OF the various sentimental fallacies entertained by adult humanity in regard to childhood, none are more ingeniously inaccurate and gratuitously idiotic than a comfortable belief in its profound ignorance of the events in which it daily moves, and the motives and characters of the people who surround it. Yet even the occasional revelations of an *enfant terrible* are as nothing compared to the perilous secrets which a discreet infant daily buttons up, or secures with a hook-and-eye, or even fastens with a safety-pin across its gentle bosom. Society can never cease to be grateful for that tact and consideration — qualities more often joined with childish intuition and perception than with matured observation — that they owe to it; and the most accomplished man or woman of the great world might take a lesson from this little audience who receive from their lips the lie they feel too palpable, with round-eyed complacency, or outwardly

accept as moral and genuine the hollow sentiment they have overheard rehearsed in private for their benefit.

It was not strange therefore that the little people of the Indian Spring school knew perhaps more of the real relations of Cressy McKinstry to her admirers than the admirers themselves. Not that this knowledge was outspoken — for children rarely gossip in the grown-up sense — or even communicable by words intelligent to the matured intellect. A whisper, a laugh that often seemed vague and unmeaning, conveyed to each other a world of secret significance, and an apparently senseless burst of merriment in which the whole class joined and that the adult critic set down to “animal spirits” — a quality much more rare with children than generally supposed — was only a sympathetic expression of some discovery happily oblivious to older preoccupation. The childish simplicity of Uncle Ben perhaps appealed more strongly to their sympathy, and although, for that very reason, they regarded him with no more respect than they did each other, he was at times carelessly admitted to their confidence. It was especially Rupert Filgee who extended a kind

of patronizing protectorate over him — not unmixed with doubts of his sanity, in spite of the promised confidential clerkship he was to receive from his hands.

On the day of the events chronicled in the preceding chapter, Rupert on returning from school was somewhat surprised to find Uncle Ben perched upon the rail-fence before the humble door of the Filgee mansion and evidently awaiting him. Slowly dismounting as Rupert and Johnny approached, he beamed upon the former for some moments with arch and yet affable mystery.

“Roopy, old man, I s’pose ye’ve got yer duds all ready in yer pack, eh?”

A flush of pleasure passed over the boy’s handsome face. He cast, however, a hurried look down on the all-pervading Johnny.

“’Cause ye see we kalkilate to take the down stage to Sacramento at four o’clock,” continued Uncle Ben, enjoying Rupert’s half sceptical surprise. “Ye enter into office, so to speak, with me at that hour, when the sellery, seventy-five dollars a month and board, ez private and confidential clerk, begins — eh?”

Rupert’s dimples deepened in charming, almost feminine, embarrassment. “But dad — ?” he stammered.

“Et’s all right with *him*. He’s agreeable.”

“But — ?”

Uncle Ben followed Rupert’s glance at Johnny, who however appeared to be absorbed in the pattern of Uncle Ben’s new trousers.

“That’s fixed,” he said with a meaning smile. “There’s a sort o’ *bonus* we pays down, you know — for a Chinyman to do the odd jobs.”

“And teacher — Mr. Ford — did ye tell him?” said Rupert brightening.

Uncle Ben coughed slightly. “He’s agreeable, too, I reckon. That is,” he wiped his mouth meditatively, “he ez good ez allowed it in gin’ral conversation a week ago, Roop.”

A swift shadow of suspicion darkened the boy’s brown eyes. “Is anybody else goin’ with us?” he said quickly.

“Not this yer trip,” replied Uncle Ben complacently. “Ye see, Roop,” he continued, drawing him aside with an air of comfortable mystery, “this yer biz’ness b’longs to the private and confidential branch of the office. From informashun we’ve received” —

“ *We?* ” interrupted Rupert.

“ ‘*We,*’ that’s the *office*, you know,” continued Uncle Ben with a heavy assumption of business formality, “ wot we’ve received per several hands and consignee — we — that’s *you* and *me*, Roop — we goes down to Sacramento to inquire into the standin’ of a certying party, as per invoice, and ter see — ter see — ter negotiate you know, ter find out if she’s married or di-vorced,” he concluded quickly, as if abandoning for the moment his business manner in consideration of Rupert’s inexperience. “ We’re to find out her standin’, Roop,” he began again with a more judicious blending of ease and technicality, “and her contracts, if any, and where she lives and her way o’ life, and examine her books and papers ez to marriages and sich, and arbitrate with her gin’rally in conversation — you inside the house and me out on the pavement, ready to be called in if an interview with business principals is desired.”

Observing Rupert somewhat perplexed and confused with these technicalities, he tactfully abandoned them for the present, and consulting a pocket-book said, “ I’ve made a memorandum of some pints that

we'll talk over on the journey," again charged Rupert to be punctually at the stage office with his carpet-bag, and cheerfully departed.

When he had disappeared Johnny Filgee, without a single word of explanation, fell upon his brother, and at once began a violent attack of kicks and blows upon his legs and other easily accessible parts of his person, accompanying his assault with unintelligible gasps and actions, finally culminating in a flood of tears and the casting of himself on his back in the dust with the copper-fastened toes of his small boots turning imaginary wheels in the air. Rupert received these characteristic marks of despairing and outraged affection with great forbearance, only saying, "There, now, Johnny, quit that," and eventually bearing him still struggling into the house. Here Johnny, declaring that he would kill any "Chinyman" that offered to dress him, and burn down the house after his brother's infamous desertion of it, Rupert was constrained to mingle a few nervous, excited tears with his brother's outbreak. Whereat Johnny, admitting the alleviation of an orange, a four-bladed knife, and the reversionary interest

in much of Rupert's personal property, became more subdued. Sitting there with their arms entwined about each other, the sunlight searching the shiftless desolation of their motherless home, the few cheap playthings they had known lying around them, they beguiled themselves with those charming illusions of their future intentions common to their years — illusions they only half believed themselves and half accepted of each other. Rupert was quite certain that he would return in a few days with a gold watch and a present for Johnny, and Johnny, with a baleful vision of never seeing him again, and a catching breath, magnificently undertook to bring in the wood and build the fire and wash the dishes "all of himself." And then there were a few childish confidences regarding their absent father — then ingenuously playing poker in the Magnolia Saloon — that might have made that public-spirited, genial companion somewhat uncomfortable, and more tears that were half smiling and some brave silences that were wholly pathetic, and then the hour for Rupert's departure all too suddenly arrived. They separated with ostentatious whooping, and then Johnny, suddenly overcome with

the dreadfulness of all earthly things, and the hollowness of life generally, instantly resolved to run away!

To do this he prepared himself with a purposeless hatchet, an inconsistent but long-treasured lump of putty and all the sugar that was left in the cracked sugar-bowl. Thus accoutred he sallied forth, first to remove all traces of his hated existence that might be left in his desk at school. If the master were there he would say Rupert had sent him; if he was n't, he would climb in at the window. The sun was already sinking when he reached the clearing and found a cavalcade of armed men around the building.

Johnny's first conviction was that the master had killed Uncle Ben or Masters, and that the men, taking advantage of the absence of his — Johnny's — big brother, were about to summarily execute him. Observing no struggle from within, his second belief was that the master had been suddenly elected Governor of California and was about to start with a state escort from the school-house, and that he, Johnny, was in time to see the procession. But when the master appeared with McKinstry, followed by part of the crowd afoot, this quick-witted

child of the frontier, from his secure outlook in the "brush," gathered enough from their fragmentary speech to guess the serious purport of their errand, and thrill with anticipation and slightly creepy excitement.

A duel! A thing hitherto witnessed only by grown-up men, afterwards swaggering with importance and strange technical blood-thirsty words, and now for the first time reserved for a *boy* — and that boy him, Johnny! — to behold in all its fearful completeness! A duel! of which he, Johnny, meanly abandoned by his brother, was now exalted perhaps to be the only survivor! He could scarcely credit his senses. It was too much!

To creep through the brush while the preliminaries were being settled, reach a certain silver fir on the appointed ground, and with the aid of his now lucky hatchet, climb unseen to its upper boughs, was an exciting and difficult task, but one eventually overcome by his short but energetic legs. Here he could not only see all that occurred, but by a fortunate chance the large pine next to him had been selected as the limit of the ground. The sharp eyes of the boy had long since penetrated the disguises of the remaining masked men, and when the long,

lank figure of the master's self-appointed second took up its position beneath the pines in full view of him, although hidden from the spectators, Johnny instantly recognized it to be none other than Seth Davis. The manifest inconsistency of his appearance as Mr. Ford's second with what Johnny knew of his relations to the master was the one thing that firmly fixed the incident in the boy's memory.

The men were already in position. Harrison stepped forward to give the word. Johnny's down-hanging legs tingled with cramp and excitement. Why did n't they begin? What were they waiting for? What if it were interrupted, or — terrible thought — made up at the last moment? Would they "holler" out when they were hit, or stagger round convulsively as they did at the "cirkiss"? Would they all run away afterwards and leave Johnny alone to tell the tale? And — horrible thought! — would any body believe him? Would Rupert? Rupert, had he "on'y knowed this," he would n't have gone away.

"One" —

With a child's perfect faith in the invulnerable superiority of his friends, he had not

even looked at the master, but only at his destined victim. Yet as the word "two" rang out Johnny's attention was suddenly attracted to the surprising fact that the master's second, Seth Davis, had also drawn a pistol, and from behind his tree was deliberately and stealthily aiming at McKinstry! He understood it all now — he was a friend of the master's. Bully for Seth!

"Three!"

Crack! Z-i-i-p! Crackle! What a funny noise! And yet he was obliged to throw himself flat upon the bough to keep from falling. It seemed to have snapped beneath him and benumbed his right leg. He did not know that the master's bullet, fired in the air, had ranged along the bough, stripping the bark throughout its length, and glancing with half-spent force to inflict a slight flesh wound on his leg!

He was giddy and a little frightened. And he had seen nobody hit, nor nothin'. It was all a humbug! Seth had disappeared. So had the others. There was a faint sound of voices and something like a group in the distance — that was all. It was getting dark, too, and his leg was still asleep, but warm and wet. He would get down. This

was very difficult, for his leg would not wake up, and but for the occasional support he got by striking his hatchet in the tree he would have fallen in descending. When he reached the ground his leg began to pain, and looking down he saw that his stocking and shoe were soaked with blood.

His small and dirty handkerchief, a hard wad in his pocket, was insufficient to staunch the flow. With a vague recollection of a certain poultice applied to a boil on his father's neck, he collected a quantity of soft moss and dried *yerba buena* leaves, and with the aid of his check apron and of one of his torn suspenders tightly wound round the whole mass, achieved a bandage of such elephantine proportions that he could scarcely move with it. In fact, like most imaginative children, he became slightly terrified at his own alarming precautions. Nevertheless, although a word or an outcry from him would have at that moment brought the distant group to his assistance, a certain respect to himself and his brother kept him from uttering even a whimper of weakness.

Yet he found refuge, oddly enough, in a suppressed but bitter denunciation of the

other boys of his acquaintance. What was Cal. Harrison doing, while he, Johnny, was alone in the woods, wounded in a grown-up duel—for nothing would convince this doughty infant that he had not been an active participant? Where was Jimmy Snyder that he did n't come to his assistance with the other fellers? Cowards all; they were afraid. Ho, ho! And he, Johnny, was n't afraid! ho—he did n't mind it! Nevertheless he had to repeat the phrase two or three times until, after repeated struggles to move forward through the brush, he at last sank down exhausted. By this time the distant group had slowly moved away, carrying something between them, and leaving Johnny alone in the fast coming darkness. Yet even this desertion did not affect him as strongly as his implicit belief in the cowardly treachery of his old associates.

It grew darker and darker, until the open theatre of the late conflict appeared enclosed in funereal walls; a cool searching breath of air that seemed to have crept through the bracken and undergrowth like a stealthy animal, lifted the curls on his hot forehead. He grasped his hatchet firmly as against possible wild beasts, and as a medicinal and

remedial precaution, took another turn with his suspender around his bandage. It occurred to him then that he would probably die. They would all feel exceedingly sorry and alarmed, and regret having made him wash himself on Saturday night. They would attend his funeral in large numbers in the little graveyard, where a white tombstone inscribed to "John Filgee, fell in a duel at the age of seven," would be awaiting him. He would forgive his brother, his father, and Mr. Ford. Yet even then he vaguely resented a few leaves and twigs dropped by a woodpecker in the tree above him, with a shake of his weak fist and an incoherent declaration that they could n't "play no babes in the wood on *him*." And then having composed himself he once more turned on his side to die, as became the scion of a heroic race! The free woods, touched by an upspringing wind, waved their dark arms above him, and higher yet a few patient stars silently ranged themselves around his pillow.

But with the rising wind and stars came the swift trampling of horses' hoofs and the flashing of lanterns, and Doctor Duchesne and the master swept down into the opening.

"It was here," said the master quickly, "but they must have taken him on to his own home. Let us follow."

"Hold on a moment," said the doctor, who had halted before the tree. "What's all this? Why, it's baby Filgee — by thunder!"

In another moment they had both dismounted and were leaning over the half-conscious child. Johnny turned his feverishly bright eyes from the lantern to the master and back again.

"What is it, Johnny boy?" asked the master tenderly. "Were you lost?"

With a gleam of feverish exaltation, Johnny rose, albeit wandringly, to the occasion!

"Hit!" he lisped feebly, "Hit in a doell! at the age of theven."

"What!" asked the bewildered master.

But Doctor Duchesne, after a single swift scrutiny of the boy's face, had unearthed him from his nest of leaves, laid him in his lap, and deftly ripped away the preposterous bandage. "Hold the light here. By Jove! he tells the truth. Who did it, Johnny?"

But Johnny was silent. In an interval of feverish consciousness and pain, his perception and memory had been quickened;

a suspicion of the real cause of his disaster had dawned upon him — but his childish lips were heroically sealed. The master glanced appealingly at the Doctor.

“Take him before you in the saddle to McKinstry’s,” said the latter promptly. “I can attend to both.”

The master lifted the boy tenderly in his arms. Johnny, stimulated by the prospect of a free ride, became feebly interested in his fellow sufferer.

“Did Theth hit him bad?” he asked.

“Seth?” echoed the master, wildly.

“Yeth. I theed him when he took aim.”

The master did not reply, but the next moment Johnny felt himself clasped in his arms in the saddle before him, borne like a whirlwind in the direction of the McKinstry ranch.

CHAPTER XIV.

THEY found the wounded man lying in the front room upon a rudely extemporized couch of bear-skins, he having sternly declined the effeminacy of his wife's bedroom. In the possibility of a fatal termination to his wound, and in obedience to a grim frontier tradition, he had also refused to have his boots removed in order that he might "die with them on," as became his ancestral custom. Johnny was therefore speedily made comfortable in the McKinstry bed, while Dr. Duchesne gave his whole attention to his more serious patient. The master glanced hurriedly around for Mrs. McKinstry. She was not only absent from the room, but there seemed to be no suggestion of her presence in the house. To his greater surprise the hurried inquiry that rose to his lips was checked by a significant warning from the attendant. He sat down beside the now sleeping boy, and awaited the doctor's return with his mind wandering between the condi-

tion of the little sufferer and the singular revelation that had momentarily escaped his childish lips. If Johnny had actually seen Seth fire at McKinstry, the latter's mysterious wound was accounted for — but not Seth's motive. The act was so utterly incomprehensible and inconsistent with Seth's avowed hatred of the master that the boy must have been delirious.

He was roused by the entrance of the surgeon. "It's not so bad as I thought," he said, with a reassuring nod. "It was a mighty close shave between a shattered bone and a severed artery, but we've got the ball, and he'll pull through in a week. By Jove! though — the old fire-eater was more concerned about finding the ball than living or dying! Go in there — he wants to see you. Don't let him talk too much. He's called in a lot of his friends for some reason or other — and there's a regular mass-meeting in there. Go in, and get rid of 'em. I'll look after baby Filgee — though the little chap will be all right again after another dressing."

The master cast a hurried look of relief at the surgeon, and reëntered the front room. It was filled with men whom the master in-

stinctively recognized as his former adversaries. But they gave way before him with a certain rude respect and half abashed sympathy as McKinstry called him to his side. The wounded man grasped his hand. "Lift me up a bit," he whispered. The master assisted him with difficulty to his elbow.

"Gentlemen!" said McKinstry, with a characteristic wave of his crippled hand towards the crowd as he laid the other on the master's shoulder. "Ye heerd me talkin' a minit ago; ye heer me now. This yer young man as we've slipped up on and meskalkilated has told the truth — every time! Ye ken tie to him whenever and wherever ye want to. Ye ain't expected to feel ez I feel, in course, but the man ez goes back on *him* — quo'lls with *me*. That's all — and thanks for inquiring friends. Ye'll git now, boys, and leave him a minit with me."

The men filed slowly out, a few lingering long enough to shake the master's hand with grave earnestness, or half smiling, half abashed embarrassment. The master received the proffered reconciliation of these men, who but a few hours before would have lynched him with equal sincerity, with cold bewilderment. As the door closed on the

last of the party he turned to McKinstry. The wounded man had sunk down again, but was regarding with drowsy satisfaction a leaden bullet he was holding between his finger and thumb.

"This yer shot, Mr. Ford," he said in a slow voice, whose weakness was only indicated by its extreme deliberation, "never kem from the gun I gave ye — and was never fired by you." He paused and then added with his old dull abstraction, "It's a long time since I've run agin anythin' that makes me feel more — kam."

In Mr. McKinstry's weak condition the master did not dare to make Johnny's revelation known to him, and contented himself by simply pressing his hand, but the next moment the wounded man resumed, —

"That ball jest fits Seth's navy revolver — and the hound hes made tracks outer the country."

"But what motive could he have in attacking *you* at such a time?" asked the master.

"He reckoned that either I'd kill you and so he'd got shut of us both in that way, without it being noticed; or if I missed you, the others would hang *you* — ez they kalki-

lated to — for killing *me*! The idea kem to him when he overheard you hintin' you would n't return my fire."

A shuddering conviction that McKinstry had divined the real truth passed over the master. In the impulse of the moment he again would have corroborated it by revealing Johnny's story, but a glance at the growing feverishness of the wounded man checked his utterance. "Don't talk of it now," he said hurriedly. "Enough for me to know that you acquit *me*. I am here now only to beg you to compose yourself until the doctor comes back — as you seemed to be alone, and Mrs. McKinstry" — he stopped in awkward embarrassment.

A singular confusion overspread the invalid's face. "She hed steppt out afore this happened, owin' to contrairy opinions betwixt me and her. Ye mout hev noticed, Mr. Ford, that gin'rally she did n't 'pear to cotton to ye! Thar ain't a woman a goin' ez is the ekal of Blair Rawlins' darter in nussin' a man and keeping him in fightin' order, but in matters like things that consarn herself and Cress, I begin to think, Mr. Ford, that somehow, she ain't exakly — kam! Bein' kam yourself, ye'll put any

unpleasantness down to that. Wotever you hear from *her*, and, for the matter o' that, from her own darter too — for I'm takin' back the foolishness I said to ye over yon about your runnin' off with Cress — you'll remember, Mr. Ford, it war n't from no ill feeling to *you*, in her or Cress — but on'y a want of kam! I mout hev had *my* ideas about Cress, you mout hev had *yours*, and that fool Dabney mout hev had *his*; but it war n't the old woman's — nor Cressy's — it war n't Blair Rawlins' darter's idea — nor yet *her* darter's! And why? For want o' kam! Times I reckon it was left out o' woman's nater. And bein' kam yourself, you understand it, and take it all in."

The old look of drowsy pain had settled so strongly in his red eyes again that the master was fain to put his hand gently over them, and with a faint smile beg him to compose himself to sleep. This he finally did after a whispered suggestion that he himself was feeling "more kam." The master sat for some moments with his hand upon the sleeping man's eyes, and a vague and undefinable sense of loneliness seemed to fall upon him from the empty rafters of the silent and deserted house. The rising

wind moaned fitfully around its bleak shell with the despairing sound of far and forever receding voices. So strong was the impression that when the doctor and McKinstry's attending brother reëntered the room, the master still lingered beside the bed with a dazed sensation of abandonment that the doctor's practical reassuring smile could hardly dispel.

"He's doing splendidly now," he said, listening to the sleeper's more regular respiration: "and I'd advise you to go now, Mr. Ford, before he wakes, lest he might be tempted to excite himself by talking to you again. He's really quite out of danger now. Good-night! I'll drop in on you at the hotel when I return."

The master, albeit still confused and bewildered, felt his way to the door and out into the open night. The wind was still despairingly wrestling with the tree-tops, but the far receding voices seemed to be growing fainter in the distance, until, as he passed on, they too seemed to pass away forever.

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Monday morning had come again, and the master was at his desk in the school-

house early, with a still damp and inky copy of the *Star* fresh from the press before him. The free breath of the pines was blowing in the window, and bringing to his ears the distant voices of his slowly gathering flock, as he read as follows:—

“The perpetrator of the dastardly outrage at the Indian Spring Academy on Thursday last — which, through unfortunate misrepresentation of the facts, led to a premature calling out of several of our most public-spirited citizens, and culminated in a most regrettable encounter between Mr. McKinstry and the accomplished and estimable principal of the school — has, we regret to say, escaped condign punishment by leaving the country with his relations. If, as is seriously whispered, he was also guilty of an unparalleled offence against a chivalrous code which will exclude him in the future from ever seeking redress at the Court of Honor, our citizens will be only too glad to get rid of the contamination of being obliged to arrest him. Those of our readers who know the high character of the two gentlemen who were thus forced into a hostile meeting, will not be surprised to know that the most ample apologies were tendered

on both sides, and that the *entente cordiale* has been thoroughly restored. The bullet — which it is said played a highly important part in the subsequent explanation, proving to have come from a *revolver* fired by some outsider — has been extracted from Mr. McKinstry's thigh, and he is doing well, with every prospect of a speedy recovery."

Smiling, albeit not uncomplacently, at this valuable contribution to history from an unfettered press, his eye fell upon the next paragraph, perhaps not so complacently: —

"Benjamin Daubigny, Esq., who left town for Sacramento on important business, not entirely unconnected with his new interests in Indian Springs, will, it is rumored, be shortly joined by his wife, who has been enabled by his recent good fortune to leave her old home in the States, and take her proper proud position at his side. Although personally unknown to Indian Springs, Mrs. Daubigny is spoken of as a beautiful and singularly accomplished woman, and it is to be regretted that her husband's interests will compel them to abandon Indian Springs for Sacramento as a future residence. Mr. Daubigny was accompanied

by his private secretary Rupert, the eldest son of H. G. Filgee, Esq., who has been a promising graduate of the Indian Spring Academy, and offers a bright example to the youth of this district. We are happy to learn that his younger brother is recovering rapidly from a slight accident received last week through the incautious handling of firearms."

The master, with his eyes upon the paper, remained so long plunged in a reverie that the school-room was quite filled and his little flock was wonderingly regarding him before he recalled himself. He was hurriedly reaching his hand towards the bell when he was attracted by the rising figure of Octavia Dean.

"Please, sir, you did n't ask if we had any news!"

"True — I forgot," said the master smiling. "Well, have you anything to tell us?"

"Yes, sir. Cressy McKinstry has left school."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir; she's married."

"Married," repeated the master with an effort, yet conscious of the eyes concentrated

upon his colorless face. "Married — and to whom?"

"To Joe Masters, sir, at the Baptist Chapel at Big Bluff, Sunday, an' Marm McKinstry was thar with her."

There was a momentary and breathless pause. Then the voices of his little pupils — those sage and sweet truants from tradition, those gentle but relentless historians of the future — rose around him in shrill chorus: —

"Why, we knowed it all along, sir!"

A FIRST FAMILY OF
TASAJARA

A FIRST FAMILY OF TASAJARA.

CHAPTER I.

“IT blows,” said Joe Wingate.

As if to accent the words of the speaker a heavy gust of wind at that moment shook the long light wooden structure which served as the general store of Sidon settlement, in Contra Costa. Even after it had passed a prolonged whistle came through the keyhole, sides, and openings of the closed glass front doors, that served equally for windows, and filled the canvas ceiling which hid the roof above like a bellying sail. A wave of enthusiastic emotion seemed to be communicated to a line of straw hats and sou-westers suspended from a cross-beam, and swung them with every appearance of festive rejoicing, while a few dusters, overcoats, and “hickory” shirts hanging on the side walls exhibited such marked though idiotic animation that it had the effect of a satirical

comment on the lazy, purposeless figures of the four living inmates of the store.

Ned Billings momentarily raised his head and shoulders depressed in the back of his wooden armchair, glanced wearily around, said, "You bet, it's no slouch of a storm," and then lapsed again with further extended legs and an added sense of comfort.

Here the third figure, which had been leaning listlessly against the shelves, putting aside the arm of a swaying overcoat that seemed to be emptily embracing him, walked slowly from behind the counter to the door, examined its fastenings, and gazed at the prospect. He was the owner of the store, and the view was a familiar one, — a long stretch of treeless waste before him meeting an equal stretch of dreary sky above, and night hovering somewhere between the two. This was indicated by splashes of darker shadow as if washed in with india ink, and a lighter low-lying streak that might have been the horizon, but was not. To the right, on a line with the front door of the store, were several scattered, widely dispersed objects, that, although vague in outline, were rigid enough in angles to suggest sheds or barns, but certainly not trees.

"There's a heap more wet to come afore the wind goes down," he said, glancing at the sky. "Hark to that, now!"

They listened lazily. There was a faint murmur from the shingles above; then suddenly the whole window was filmed and blurred as if the entire prospect had been wiped out with a damp sponge. The man turned listlessly away.

"That's the kind that soaks in; thar won't be much teamin' over Tasajara for the next two weeks, I reckon," said the fourth lounge, who, seated on a high barrel, was nibbling — albeit critically and fastidiously — biscuits and dried apples alternately from open boxes on the counter. "It's lucky you've got in your winter stock, Harkutt."

The shrewd eyes of Mr. Harkutt, proprietor, glanced at the occupation of the speaker as if even his foresight might have 'ts possible drawbacks, but he said nothing.

"There'll be no show for Sidon until you've got a wagon road from here to the creek," said Billings languidly, from the depths of his chair. "But what's the use o' talkin'? Thar ain't energy enough in all Tasajara to build it. A God-forsaken place, that two months of the year can only be

reached by a mail-rider once a week, don't look ez if it was goin' to break its back haulin' in goods and settlers. I tell ye what, gentlemen, it makes me sick!" And apparently it had enfeebled him to the extent of interfering with his aim in that expectoration of disgust against the stove with which he concluded his sentence.

"Why don't *you* build it?" asked Wingate, carelessly.

"I would n't on principle," said Billings. "It's gov'ment work. What did we whoop up things here last spring to elect Kennedy to the legislation for? What did I rig up my shed and a thousand feet of lumber for benches at the barbecue for? Why, to get Kennedy elected and make him get a bill passed for the road! That's *my* share of building it, if it comes to that. And I only wish some folks, that blow enough about what oughter be done to bulge out that ceiling, would only do as much as *I* have done for Sidon."

As this remark seemed to have a personal as well as local application, the store-keeper diplomatically turned it. "There's a good many as *don't* believe that a road from here to the creek is going to do any

good to Sidon. It's very well to say the creek is an *embarcadero*, but callin' it so don't put enough water into it to float a steam-boat from the bay, nor clear out the reeds and *tules* in it. Even if the State builds you roads, it ain't got no call to make Tasa-jara Creek navigable for ye; and as that will cost as much as the road, I don't see where the money's comin' from for both."

"There's water enough in front of 'Lig' Curtis's shanty, and his location is only a mile along the bank," returned Billings.

"Water enough for him to laze away his time fishin' when he's sober, and deep enough to drown him when he's drunk," said Wingate. "If you call that an *embarcadero*, you kin buy it any day from 'Lige, — title, possession, and shanty thrown in, — for a demijohn o' whiskey."

The fourth man here distastefully threw back a half-nibbled biscuit into the box, and languidly slipped from the barrel to the floor, fastidiously flicking the crumbs from his clothes as he did so. "I reckon somebody 'll get it for nothing, if 'Lige don't pull up mighty soon. He 'll either go off his head with jim-jams or jump into the creek. He's about as near desp'rit as they make 'em,

and havin' no partner to look after him, and him alone in the *tules*, ther' 's no tellin' *what* he may do."

Billings, stretched at full length in his chair, here gurgled derisively. "Desp'rit! — ketch him! Why, that 's his little game! He 's jist playin' off his desp'rit condition to frighten Sidon. Whenever any one asks him why he don't go to work, whenever he 's hard up for a drink, whenever he 's had too much or too little, he 's workin' that desp'rit dodge, and even talkin' o' killin' himself! Why, look here," he continued, momentarily raising himself to a sitting posture in his disgust, "it was only last week he was over at Rawlett's trying to raise provisions and whiskey outer his water rights on the creek! Fact, sir, — had it all written down lawyer-like on paper. Rawlett did n't exactly see it in that light, and told him so. Then he up with the desp'rit dodge and began to work that. Said if he had to starve in a swamp like a dog he might as well kill himself at once, and would too if he could afford the weppins. Johnson said it was not a bad idea, and offered to lend him his revolver; Bilson handed up his shot-gun, and left it alongside of him, and turned his head away considerate-

like and thoughtful while Rawlett handed him a box of rat pizon over the counter, in case he preferred suthin' more quiet. Well, what did 'Lige do? Nothin'! Smiled kinder sickly, looked sorter wild, and shut up. He did n't suicide much. No, sir! He did n't kill himself, — not he. Why, old Bixby — and he's a deacon in good standin' — allowed, in 'Lige's hearin' and for 'Lige's benefit, that self-destruction was better nor bad example, and proved it by Scripture too. And yet 'Lige did nothin'! Desp'rit! He's only desp'rit to laze around and fish all day off a log in the *tules*, and soak up with whiskey, until, betwixt fever an' ague and the jumps, he kinder shakes hisself free o' responsibility."

A long silence followed; it was somehow felt that the subject was incongruously exciting; Billings allowed himself to lapse again behind the back of his chair. Meantime it had grown so dark that the dull glow of the stove was beginning to outline a faint halo on the ceiling even while it plunged the further lines of shelves behind the counter into greater obscurity.

"Time to light up, Harkutt, ain't it?" said Wingate, tentatively.

“ Well, I was reckoning ez it’s such a wild night there would n’t be any use keepin’ open, and when you fellows left I’d just shut up for good and make things fast,” said Harkutt, dubiously. Before his guests had time to fully weigh this delicate hint, another gust of wind shook the tenement, and even forced the unbolted upper part of the door to yield far enough to admit an eager current of humid air that seemed to justify the wisdom of Harkutt’s suggestion. Billings slowly and with a sigh assumed a sitting posture in the chair. The biscuit-nibbler selected a fresh dainty from the counter, and Wingate abstractedly walked to the window and rubbed the glass. Sky and water had already disappeared behind a curtain of darkness that was illuminated by a single point of light—the lamp in the window of some invisible but nearer house—which threw its rays across the glistening shallows in the road. “ Well,” said Wingate, buttoning up his coat in slow dejection, “ I reckon I oughter be travelin’ to help the old woman do the chores before supper.” He had just recognized the light in his own dining-room, and knew by that sign that his long-waiting helpmeet had finally done the chores herself.

"Some folks have it mighty easy," said Billings, with long-drawn discontent, as he struggled to his feet. "You 've only a step to go, and yer's me and Peters there" — indicating the biscuit-nibbler, who was beginning to show alarming signs of returning to the barrel again—"hev got to trapse five times that distance."

"More 'n half a mile, if it comes to that," said Peters, gloomily. He paused in putting on his overcoat as if thinking better of it, while even the more fortunate and contiguous Wingate languidly lapsed against the counter again.

The moment was a critical one. Billings was evidently also regretfully eying the chair he had just quitted. Harkutt resolved on a heroic effort.

"Come, boys," he said, with brisk conviviality, "take a parting drink with me before you go." Producing a black bottle from some obscurity beneath the counter that smelt strongly of india-rubber boots, he placed it with four glasses before his guests. Each made a feint of holding his glass against the opaque window while filling it, although nothing could be seen. A sudden tumult of wind and rain again shook the

building, but even after it had passed the glass door still rattled violently.

"Just see what's loose, Peters," said Billings; "you're nearest it."

Peters, still holding the undrained glass in his hand, walked slowly towards it.

"It's suthin' — or somebody outside," he said, hesitatingly.

The three others came eagerly to his side. Through the glass, clouded from within by their breath, and filmed from without by the rain, some vague object was moving, and what seemed to be a mop of tangled hair was apparently brushing against the pane. The door shook again, but less strongly. Billings pressed his face against the glass. "Hol' on," he said in a quick whisper, — "it's 'Lige!" But it was too late. Harkutt had already drawn the lower bolt, and a man stumbled from the outer obscurity into the darker room.

The inmates drew away as he leaned back for a moment against the door that closed behind him. Then dimly, but instinctively, discerning the glass of liquor which Wingate still mechanically held in his hand, he reached forward eagerly, took it from Wingate's surprised and unresisting fingers, and

drained it at a gulp. The four men laughed vaguely, but not as cheerfully as they might.

"I was just shutting up," began Harkutt, dubiously.

"I won't keep you a minit," said the intruder, nervously fumbling in the breast pocket of his hickory shirt. "It's a matter of business — Harkutt — I" — But he was obliged to stop here to wipe his face and forehead with the ends of a loose handkerchief tied round his throat. From the action, and what could be seen of his pale, exhausted face, it was evident that the moisture upon it was beads of perspiration, and not the rain which some abnormal heat of his body was converting into vapor from his sodden garments as he stood there.

"I've got a document here," he began again, producing a roll of paper tremblingly from his pocket, "that I'd like you to glance over, and perhaps you'd" — His voice, which had been feverishly exalted, here broke and rattled with a cough.

Billings, Wingate, and Peters fell apart and looked out of the window. "It's too dark to read anything now, 'Lige," said Harkutt, with evasive good humor, "and I ain't lightin' up to-night."

“But I can tell you the substance of it,” said the man, with a faintness that however had all the distinctness of a whisper, “if you’ll just step inside a minute. It’s a matter of importance and a bargain” —

“I reckon we must be goin’,” said Billings to the others, with marked emphasis. “We’re keepin’ Harkutt from shuttin’ up.” “Good - night!” “Good - night!” added Peters and Wingate, ostentatiously following Billings hurriedly through the door. “So long!”

The door closed behind them, leaving Harkutt alone with his importunate intruder. Possibly his resentment at his customers’ selfish abandonment of him at this moment developed a vague spirit of opposition to them and mitigated his feeling towards Lige. He groped his way to the counter, struck a match, and lit a candle. Its feeble rays faintly illuminated the pale, drawn face of the applicant, set in a tangle of wet, unkempt, party-colored hair. It was not the face of an ordinary drunkard; although tremulous and sensitive from some artificial excitement, there was no *engorgement* or congestion in the features or complexion, albeit they were morbid and unhealthy. The

expression was of a suffering that was as much mental as physical, and yet in some vague way appeared unmeaning — and unheroic.

“I want to see you about selling my place on the creek. I want you to ~~take~~ it off my hands for a bargain. I want to ~~be~~ get quit of it, at once, for just enough to take me out o’ this. I don’t want any profit; only money enough to get away.” His utterance, which had a certain kind of cultivation, here grew thick and harsh again, and he looked eagerly at the bottle which stood on the counter.

“Look here, ’Lige,” said Harkutt, not unkindly. “It’s too late to do anythin’ to-night. You come in to-morrow.” He would have added “when you’re sober,” but for a trader’s sense of politeness to a possible customer, and probably some doubt of the man’s actual condition.

“God knows where or what I may be to-morrow! It would kill me to go back and spend another night as the last, if I don’t kill myself on the way to do it.”

Harkutt’s face darkened grimly. It was indeed as Billings had said. The pitiable weakness of the man’s manner not only

made his desperation inadequate and ineffective, but even lent it all the cheapness of acting. And, as if to accent his simulation of a part, his fingers, feebly groping in his shirt bosom, slipped aimlessly and helplessly from the shining handle of a pistol in his pocket to wander hesitatingly towards the bottle on the counter.

Harkutt took the bottle, poured out a glass of the liquor, and pushed it before his companion, who drank it eagerly. Whether it gave him more confidence, or his attention was no longer diverted, he went on more collectedly and cheerfully, and with no trace of his previous desperation in his manner. "Come, Harkutt, buy my place. It's a bargain, I tell you. I'll sell it cheap. I only want enough to get away with. Give me twenty-five dollars and it's yours. See, there's the papers — the quitclaim — all drawn up and signed." He drew the roll of paper from his pocket again, apparently forgetful of the adjacent weapon.

"Look here, 'Lige," said Harkutt, with a business-like straightening of his lips, "I ain't buyin' any land in Tasajara, — least of all yours on the creek. I've got more invested here already than I'll ever get back

again. But I tell you what I'll do. You say you can't go back to your shanty. Well, seein' how rough it is outside, and that the waters of the creek are probably all over the trail by this time, I reckon you're about right. Now, there's five dollars!" He laid down a coin sharply on the counter. "Take that and go over to Rawlett's and get a bed and some supper. In the mornin' you may be able to strike up a trade with somebody else — or change your mind. How did you get here? On your hoss?"

"Yes."

"He ain't starved yet?"

"No; he can eat grass. I can't."

Either the liquor or Harkutt's practical unsentimental treatment of the situation seemed to give him confidence. He met Harkutt's eye more steadily as the latter went on. "You kin turn your hoss for the night into my stock corral next to Rawlett's. It'll save you payin' for fodder and stablin'."

The man took up the coin with a certain slow gravity which was almost like dignity. "Thank you," he said, laying the paper on the counter. "I'll leave that as security."

"Don't want it, 'Lige," said Harkutt, pushing it back.

"I 'd rather leave it."

"But suppose you have a chance to sell it to somebody at Rawlett's?" continued Harkutt, with a precaution that seemed ironical.

"I don't think there's much chance of that."

He remained quiet, looking at Harkutt with an odd expression as he rubbed the edge of the coin that he held between his fingers abstractedly on the counter. Something in his gaze — rather perhaps the apparent absence of anything in it approximate to the present occasion — was beginning to affect Harkutt with a vague uneasiness. Providentially a resumed onslaught of wind and rain against the panes effected a diversion. "Come," he said, with brisk practicality, "you'd better hurry on to Rawlett's before it gets worse. Have your clothes dried by his fire, take suthin' to eat, and you'll be all right." He rubbed his hands cheerfully, as if summarily disposing of the situation, and incidentally of all 'Lige's troubles, and walked with him to the door. Nevertheless, as the man's look re-

mained unchanged, he hesitated a moment with his hand on the handle, in the hope that he would say something, even if only to repeat his appeal, but he did not. Then Harkutt opened the door; the man moved mechanically out, and at the distance of a few feet seemed to melt into the rain and darkness. Harkutt remained for a moment with his face pressed against the glass. After an interval he thought he heard the faint splash of hoofs in the shallows of the road; he opened the door softly and looked out.

The light had disappeared from the nearest house; only an uncertain bulk of shapeless shadows remained. Other remoter and more vague outlines near the horizon seemed to have a funereal suggestion of tombs and grave mounds, and one — a low shed near the road — looked not unlike a halted bier. He hurriedly put up the shutters in a momentary lulling of the wind, and reëntering the store began to fasten them from within.

While thus engaged an inner door behind the counter opened softly and cautiously, projecting a brighter light into the deserted apartment from some sacred domestic interior with the warm and wholesome incense

of cooking. It served to introduce also the equally agreeable presence of a young girl, who, after assuring herself of the absence of every one but the proprietor, idly slipped into the store, and placing her rounded elbows, from which her sleeves were uprolled, upon the counter, leaned lazily upon them, with both hands supporting her dimpled chin, and gazed indolently at him; so indolently that, with her pretty face once fixed in this comfortable attitude, she was constrained to follow his movements with her eyes alone, and often at an uncomfortable angle. It was evident that she offered the final but charming illustration of the enfeebling listlessness of Sidon.

“So those loafers have gone at last,” she said, meditatively. “They’ll take root here some day, pop. The idea of three strong men like that lazing round for two mortal hours doin’ nothin’. Well!” As if to emphasize her disgust she threw her whole weight upon the counter by swinging her feet from the floor to touch the shelves behind her.

Mr. Harkutt only replied by a slight grunt as he continued to screw on the shutters.

“Want me to help you, dad?” she said, without moving.

Mr. Harkutt muttered something unintelligible, which, however, seemed to imply a negative, and her attention here feebly wandered to the roll of paper, and she began slowly and lazily to read it aloud.

“‘For value received, I hereby sell, assign, and transfer to Daniel D. Harkutt all my right, title, and interest in, and to the undivided half of, Quarter Section 4, Range 5, Tasajara Township’ — hum — hum,” she murmured, running her eyes to the bottom of the page. “Why, Lord! It’s that ‘Lige Curtis!’” she laughed. “The idea of *him* having property! Why, dad, you ain’t been *that* silly!”

“Put down that paper, miss,” he said, aggrievedly; “bring the candle here, and help me to find one of these infernal screws that’s dropped.”

The girl indolently disengaged herself from the counter and Elijah Curtis’s transfer, and brought the candle to her father. The screw was presently found and the last fastening secured. “Supper gettin’ cold, dad,” she said, with a slight yawn. Her father sympathetically responded by stretch-

ing himself from his stooping position, and the two passed through the private door into inner domesticity, leaving the already forgotten paper lying with other articles of barter on the counter.

CHAPTER II.

WITH the closing of the little door behind them they seemed to have shut out the turmoil and vibration of the storm. The reason became apparent when, after a few paces, they descended half a dozen steps to a lower landing. This disclosed the fact that the dwelling part of the Sidon General Store was quite below the level of the shop and the road, and on the slope of the solitary undulation of the Tasajara plain, — a little ravine that fell away to a brawling stream below. The only arboreous growth of Tasajara clothed its banks in the shape of willows and alders that set compactly around the quaint, irregular dwelling which straggled down the ravine and looked upon a slope of bracken and foliage on either side. The transition from the black, treeless, storm-swept plain to this sheltered declivity was striking and suggestive. From the opposite bank one might fancy that the youthful and original dwelling had ambitiously mounted

the crest, but, appalled at the dreary prospect beyond, had gone no further; while from the road it seemed as if the fastidious proprietor had tried to draw a line between the vulgar trading-post, with which he was obliged to face the coarser civilization of the place, and the privacy of his domestic life. The real fact, however, was that the ravine furnished wood and water; and as Nature also provided one wall of the house,—as in the well-known example of aboriginal cave dwellings,—its peculiar construction commended itself to Sidon on the ground of involving little labor.

Howbeit, from the two open windows of the sitting-room which they had entered only the faint pattering of dripping boughs and a slight murmur from the swollen brook indicated the storm that shook the upper plain, and the cool breath of laurel, syringa, and alder was wafted through the neat apartment. Passing through that pleasant rural atmosphere they entered the kitchen, a much larger room, which appeared to serve occasionally as a dining-room, and where supper was already laid out. A stout, comfortable-looking woman — who had, however, a singularly permanent expression of pained sym-

thy upon her face — welcomed them in tones of gentle commiseration.

“ Ah, there you be, you two ! Now sit ye right down, dears ; *do*. You must be tired out ; and you, Phemie, love, draw up by your poor father. There — that ’s right. You ’ll be better soon.”

There was certainly no visible sign of suffering or exhaustion on the part of either father or daughter, nor the slightest apparent earthly reason why they should be expected to exhibit any. But, as already intimated, it was part of Mrs. Harkutt’s generous idiosyncrasy to look upon all humanity as suffering and toiling ; to be petted, humored, condoled with, and fed. It had, in the course of years, imparted a singularly caressing sadness to her voice, and given her the habit of ending her sentences with a melancholy cooing and an unintelligible murmur of agreement. It was undoubtedly sincere and sympathetic, but at times inappropriate and distressing. It had lost her the friendship of the one humorist of Tasajara, whose best jokes she had received with such heartfelt commiseration and such pained appreciation of the evident labor involved as to reduce him to silence.

Accustomed as Mr. Harkutt was to his

wife's peculiarity, he was not above assuming a certain slightly fatigued attitude befitting it. "Yes," he said, with a vague sigh, "where 's Clemmie?"

"Lyin' down since dinner; she reckoned she would n't get up to supper," she returned soothingly. "Phemie 's goin' to take her up some sass and tea. The poor dear child wants a change."

"She wants to go to 'Frisco, and so do I, pop," said Phemie, leaning her elbow half over her father's plate. "Come, pop, say do, — just for a week."

"Only for a week," murmured the commiserating Mrs. Harkutt.

"Perhaps," responded Harkutt, with gloomy sarcasm, "ye would n't mind tellin' me how you 're goin' to get there, and where the money 's comin' from to take you? There 's no teamin' over Tasajara till the rain stops, and no money comin' in till the ranchmen can move their stuff. There ain't a hundred dollars in all Tasajara; at least there ain't been the first red cent of it paid across my counter for a fortnit! Perhaps if you do go you would n't mind takin' me and the store along with ye, and leavin' us there."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Harkutt, with sympathetic but shameless tergiversation. "Don't bother your poor father, Phemie, love; don't you see he's just tired out? And you're not eatin' anything, dad."

As Mr. Harkutt was uneasily conscious that he had been eating heartily in spite of his financial difficulties, he turned the subject abruptly. "Where's John Milton?"

Mrs. Harkutt shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed meditatively on the floor before the fire and in the chimney corner for her only son, baptized under that historic title. "He was here a minit ago," she said doubtfully. "I really can't think where he's gone. But," assuringly, "it ain't far."

"He's skipped with one o' those story-books he's borrowed," said Phemie. "He's always doin' it. Like as not he's reading with a candle in the wood-shed. We'll all be burnt up some night."

"But he's got through his chores," interposed Mrs. Harkutt deprecatingly.

"Yes," continued Harkutt, aggrievedly, "but instead of goin' to bed, or addin' up bills, or takin' count o' stock, or even doin' sums or suthin' useful, he's ruinin' his eyes and wastin' his time over trash." He rose

and walked slowly into the sitting-room, followed by his daughter and a murmur of commiseration from his wife. But Mrs. Harkutt's ministration for the present did not pass beyond her domain, the kitchen.

"I reckon ye ain't expectin' anybody to-night, Phemie?" said Mr. Harkutt, sinking into a chair, and placing his slippered feet against the wall.

"No," said Phemie, "unless something possesses that sappy little Parmlee to make one of his visitations. John Milton says that out on the road it blows so you can't stand up. It's just like that idiot Parmlee to be blown in here, and not have strength of mind enough to get away again."

Mr. Harkutt smiled. It was that arch yet approving, severe yet satisfied smile with which the deceived male parent usually receives any depreciation of the ordinary young man by his daughters. Euphemia was no giddy thing to be carried away by young men's attentions, — not she! Sitting back comfortably in his rocking-chair, he said, "Play something."

The young girl went to the closet and took from the top shelf an excessively ornamented accordion, — the opulent gift of a reckless

admirer. It was so inordinately decorated, so gorgeous in the blaze of *papier maché*, mother-of-pearl, and tortoise-shell on keys and keyboard, and so ostentatiously radiant in the pink silk of its bellows that it seemed to overawe the plainly furnished room with its splendors. "You ought to keep it on the table in a glass vase, Phemie," said her father admiringly.

"And have *him* think I worshiped it! Not me, indeed! He 's conceited enough already," she returned, saucily.

Mr. Harkutt again smiled his approbation, then deliberately closed his eyes and threw his head back in comfortable anticipation of the coming strains.

It is to be regretted that in brilliancy, finish, and even cheerfulness of quality they were not up to the suggestions of the keys and keyboard. The most discreet and cautious effort on the part of the young performer seemed only to produce startlingly unexpected, but instantly suppressed complaints from the instrument, accompanied by impatient interjections of "No, no," from the girl herself. Nevertheless, with her pretty eyebrows knitted in some charming distress of memory, her little mouth half open be-

tween an apologetic smile and the exertion of working the bellows, with her white, rounded arms partly lifted up and waving before her, she was pleasantly distracting to the eye. Gradually, as the scattered strains were marshaled into something like an air, she began to sing also, glossing over the instrumental weaknesses, filling in certain dropped notes and omissions, and otherwise assisting the ineffectual accordion with a youthful but not unmusical voice. The song was a lugubrious religious chant; under its influence the house seemed to sink into greater quiet, permitting in the intervals the murmur of the swollen creek to appear more distinct, and even the far moaning of the wind on the plain to become faintly audible. At last, having fairly mastered the instrument, Phemie got into the full swing of the chant. Unconstrained by any criticism, carried away by the sound of her own voice, and perhaps a youthful love for mere uproar, or possibly desirous to drown her father's voice, which had unexpectedly joined in with a discomposing bass, the conjoined utterances seemed to threaten the frail structure of their dwelling, even as the gale had distended the store behind them. When they ceased at last it was in an

accession of dripping from the apparently stirred leaves outside. And then a voice, evidently from the moist depths of the abyss below, called out, —

“Hullo, there!”

Phemie put down the accordion, said, “Who’s that now?” went to the window, lazily leaned her elbows on the sill, and peered into the darkness. Nothing was to be seen; the open space of dimly outlined landscape had that blank, uncommunicative impenetrability with which Nature always confronts and surprises us at such moments. It seemed to Phemie that she was the only human being present. Yet after the feeling had passed she fancied she heard the wash of the current against some object in the stream, half stationary and half resisting.

“Is any one down there? Is that you, Mr. Parmlee?” she called.

There was a pause. Some invisible auditor said to another, “It’s a young lady.” Then the first voice rose again in a more deferential tone: “Are we anywhere near Sidon?”

“This is Sidon,” answered Harkutt, who had risen, and was now quite obliterating his daughter’s outline at the window.

“Thank you,” said the voice. “Can we land anywhere here, on this bank?”

“Run down, pop; they ’re strangers,” said the girl, with excited, almost childish eagerness.

“Hold on,” called out Harkutt, “I ’ll be thar in a moment!” He hastily thrust his feet into a pair of huge boots, clapped on an oilskin hat and waterproof, and disappeared through a door that led to a lower staircase. Phemie, still at the window, albeit with a newly added sense of self-consciousness, hung out breathlessly. Presently a beam of light from the lower depths of the house shot out into the darkness. It was her father with a bull’s-eye lantern. As he held it up and clambered cautiously down the bank, its rays fell upon the turbid rushing stream, and what appeared to be a rough raft of logs held with difficulty against the bank by two men with long poles. In its centre was a roll of blankets, a valise and saddle-bags, and the shining brasses of some odd-looking instruments.

As Mr. Harkutt, supporting himself by a willow branch that overhung the current, held up the lantern, the two men rapidly transferred their freight from the raft to the

bank, and leaped ashore. The action gave an impulse to the raft, which, no longer held in position by the poles, swung broadside to the current and was instantly swept into the darkness.

Not a word had been spoken, but now the voices of the men rose freely together. Phemie listened with intense expectation. The explanation was simple. They were surveyors who had been caught by the overflow on Tasajara plain, had abandoned their horses on the bank of Tasajara Creek, and with a hastily constructed raft had intrusted themselves and their instruments to the current. "But," said Harkutt quickly, "there is no connection between Tasajara Creek and this stream."

The two men laughed. "There is *now*," said one of them.

"But Tasajara Creek is a part of the bay," said the astonished Harkutt, "and this stream rises inland and only runs into the bay four miles lower down. And I don't see how" —

"You're almost twelve feet lower here than Tasajara Creek," said the first man, with a certain professional authority, "and that's *why*. There's more water than Tasajara Creek can carry, and it's seeking the

bay this way. Look," he continued, taking the lantern from Harkutt's hand and casting its rays on the stream, "that's salt drift from the upper bay, and part of Tasajara Creek's running by your house now! Don't be alarmed," he added reassuringly, glancing at the staring storekeeper. "You're all right here; this is only the overflow and will find its level soon."

But Mr. Harkutt remained gazing abstractedly at the smiling speaker. From the window above the impatient Phemie was wondering why he kept the strangers waiting in the rain while he talked about things that were perfectly plain. It was so like a man!

"Then there's a waterway straight to Tasajara Creek?" he said slowly.

"There is, as long as this flood lasts," returned the first speaker promptly; "and a cutting through the bank of two or three hundred yards would make it permanent. Well, what's the matter with that?"

"Nothin'," said Harkutt hurriedly. "I am only considerin'! But come in, dry yourselves, and take suthin'."

The light over the rushing water was withdrawn, and the whole prospect sank back into profound darkness. Mr. Harkutt had

disappeared with his guests. Then there was the familiar shuffle of his feet on the staircase, followed by other more cautious footsteps that grew delicately and even courteously deliberate as they approached. At which the young girl, in some new sense of decorum, drew in her pretty head, glanced around the room quickly, reset the tidy on her father's chair, placed the resplendent accordion like an ornament in the exact centre of the table, and then vanished into the hall as Mr. Harkutt entered with the strangers.

They were both of the same age and appearance, but the principal speaker was evidently the superior of his companion, and although their attitude to each other was equal and familiar, it could be easily seen that he was the leader. He had a smooth, beardless face, with a critical expression of eye and mouth that might have been fastidious and supercilious but for the kindly, humorous perception that tempered it. His quick eye swept the apartment and then fixed itself upon the accordion, but a smile lit up his face as he said quietly, —

“I hope we have n't frightened the musician away. It was bad enough to have interrupted the young lady.”

"No, no," said Mr. Harkutt, who seemed to have lost his abstraction in the nervousness of hospitality. "I reckon she's only lookin' after her sick sister. But come into the kitchen, both of you, straight off, and while you're dryin' your clothes, mother'll fix you suthin' hot."

"We only need to change our boots and stockings; we've some dry ones in our pack downstairs," said the first speaker hesitatingly.

"I'll fetch 'em up and you can change in the kitchen. The old woman won't mind," said Harkutt reassuringly. "Come along." He led the way to the kitchen; the two strangers exchanged a glance of humorous perplexity and followed.

The quiet of the little room was once more unbroken. A far-off commiserating murmur indicated that Mrs. Harkutt was receiving her guests. The cool breath of the wet leaves without slightly stirred the white dimity curtains, and somewhere from the darkened eaves there was a still, somnolent drip. Presently a hurried whisper and a half-laugh appeared to be suppressed in the outer passage or hall. There was another moment of hesitation and the door opened suddenly and

ostentatiously, disclosing Phemie, with a taller and slighter young woman, her elder sister, at her side. Perceiving that the room was empty, they both said "Oh!" yet with a certain artificiality of manner that was evidently a lingering trace of some previous formal attitude they had assumed. Then without further speech they each selected a chair and a position, having first shaken out their dresses, and gazed silently at each other.

It may be said briefly that sitting thus — in spite of their unnatural attitude, or perhaps rather because of its suggestion of a photographic pose — they made a striking picture, and strongly accented their separate peculiarities. They were both pretty, but the taller girl, apparently the elder, had an ideal refinement and regularity of feature which was not only unlike Phemie, but gratuitously unlike the rest of her family, and as hopelessly and even wantonly inconsistent with her surroundings as was the elaborately ornamented accordion on the centre-table. She was one of those occasional creatures, episodical in the South and West, who might have been stamped with some vague ante-natal impression of a mother

given to over-sentimental contemplation of books of beauty and albums rather than the family features ; offspring of typical men and women, and yet themselves incongruous to any known local or even general type. The long swan-like neck, tendriled hair, swimming eyes, and small patrician head, had never lived or moved before in Tasajara or the West, nor perhaps even existed except as a personified "Constancy," "Meditation," or the "Baron's Bride," in mezzotint or copperplate. Even the girl's common pink print dress with its high sleeves and shoulders could not conventionalize these original outlines ; and the hand that rested stiffly on the back of her chair, albeit neither over-white nor well kept, looked as if it had never held anything but a lyre, a rose, or a good book. Even the few sprays of wild jessamine which she had placed in the coils of her waving hair, although a local fashion, became her as a special ornament.

The two girls kept their constrained and artificially elaborated attitude for a few moments, accompanied by the murmur of voices in the kitchen, the monotonous drip of the eaves before the window, and the far-off sough of the wind. Then Phemie suddenly

broke into a constrained giggle, which she however quickly smothered as she had the accordion, and with the same look of mischievous distress.

"I'm astonished at you, Phemie," said Clementina in a deep contralto voice, which seemed even deeper from its restraint. "You don't seem to have any sense. Anybody 'd think you never had seen a stranger before."

"Saw him before you did," retorted Phemie pertly. But here a pushing of chairs and shuffling of feet in the kitchen checked her. Clementina fixed an abstracted gaze on the ceiling; Phemie regarded a leaf on the window sill with photographic rigidity as the door opened to the strangers and her father.

The look of undisguised satisfaction which lit the young men's faces relieved Mr. Harkutt's awkward introduction of any embarrassment, and almost before Phemie was fully aware of it, she found herself talking rapidly and in a high key with Mr. Lawrence Grant, the surveyor, while her sister was equally, although more sedately, occupied with Mr. Stephen Rice, his assistant. But the enthusiasm of the strangers, and the desire

to please and be pleased was so genuine and contagious that presently the accordion was brought into requisition, and Mr. Grant exhibited a surprising faculty of accompaniment to Mr. Rice's tenor, in which both the girls joined.

Then a game of cards with partners followed, into which the rival parties introduced such delightful and shameless obviousness of cheating, and displayed such fascinating and exaggerated partisanship that the game resolved itself into a hilarious *mêlée*, to which peace was restored only by an exhibition of tricks of *legerdemain* with the cards by the young surveyor. All of which Mr. Harkutt supervised patronizingly, with occasional fits of abstraction, from his rocking-chair; and later Mrs. Harkutt from her kitchen threshold, wiping her arms on her apron and commiseratingly observing that she "declared, the young folks looked better already."

But it was here a more dangerous element of mystery and suggestion was added by Mr. Lawrence Grant in the telling of Miss Euphemia's fortune from the cards before him, and that young lady, pink with excitement, fluttered her little hands not unlike timid birds over the cards to be drawn, taking

them from him with an audible twitter of anxiety and great doubts whether a certain "fair-haired gentleman" was in hearts or diamonds.

"Here are two strangers," said Mr. Grant, with extraordinary gravity laying down the cards, "and here is a 'journey;' this is 'unexpected news,' and this ten of diamonds means 'great wealth' to you, which you see follows the advent of the two strangers and is some way connected with them."

"Oh, indeed," said the young lady with great pertness and a toss of her head. "I suppose they 've got the money with them."

"No, though it reaches you through them," he answered with unflinching solemnity. "Wait a bit, I have it! I see, I've made a mistake with this card. It signifies a journey or a road. Queer! is n't it, Steve? It's *the road*."

"It is queer," said Rice with equal gravity; "but it's so. The road, sure!" Nevertheless he looked up into the large eyes of Clementina with a certain confidential air of truthfulness.

"You see, ladies," continued the surveyor, appealing to them with unabashed rigidity of feature, "the cards don't lie! Luckily we

are in a position to corroborate them. The road in question is a secret known only to us and some capitalists in San Francisco. In fact even *they* don't know that it is feasible until *we* report to them. But I don't mind telling you now, as a slight return for your charming hospitality, that the road is *a railroad* from Oakland to Tasajara Creek of which we 've just made the preliminary survey. So you see what the cards mean is this : You 're not far from Tasajara Creek ; in fact with a very little expense your father could connect this stream with the creek, and have *a waterway straight to the railroad terminus*. That 's the wealth the cards promise ; and if your father knows how to take a hint he can make his fortune ! ”

It was impossible to say which was the most dominant in the face of the speaker, the expression of assumed gravity or the twinkling of humor in his eyes. The two girls with superior feminine perception divined that there was much truth in what he said, albeit they did n't entirely understand it, and what they did understand — except the man's good-humored motive — was not particularly interesting. In fact they were slightly disappointed. What had promised

to be an audaciously flirtatious declaration, and even a mischievous suggestion of marriage, had resolved itself into something absurdly practical and business-like.

Not so Mr. Harkutt. He quickly rose from his chair, and, leaning over the table, with his eyes fixed on the card as if it really signified the railroad, repeated quickly: "Railroad, eh! What's that? A railroad to Tasajara Creek? Ye don't mean it!— That is — it ain't a *sure* thing?"

"Perfectly sure. The money is ready in San Francisco now, and by this time next year"—

"A railroad to Tasajara Creek!" continued Harkutt hurriedly. "What part of it? Where?"

"At the *embarcadero* naturally," responded Grant. "There is n't but the one place for the terminus. There's an old shanty there now belongs to somebody."

"Why, pop!" said Phemie with sudden recollection, "ain't it 'Lige Curtis's house? The land he offered"—

"Hush!" said her father.

"You know, the one written in that bit of paper," continued the innocent Phemie.

"Hush! will you? God A'mighty! are

you goin' to mind me? Are you goin' to keep up your jabber when I'm speakin' to the gentlemen? Is that your manners? What next, I wonder!"

The sudden and unexpected passion of the speaker, the incomprehensible change in his voice, and the utterly disproportionate exaggeration of his attitude towards his daughters, enforced an instantaneous silence. The rain began to drip audibly at the window, the rush of the river sounded distinctly from without, even the shaking of the front part of the dwelling by the distant gale became perceptible. An angry flash sprang for an instant to the young assistant's eye, but it met the cautious glance of his friend, and together both discreetly sought the table. The two girls alone remained white and collected. "Will you go on with my fortune, Mr. Grant?" said Phemie quietly.

A certain respect, perhaps not before observable, was suggested in the surveyor's tone as he smilingly replied, "Certainly, I was only waiting for you to show your confidence in me," and took up the cards.

Mr. Harkutt coughed. "It looks as if that blamed wind had blown suthin' loose in the store," he said affectedly. "I reckon

I'll go and see." He hesitated a moment and then disappeared in the passage. Yet even here he stood irresolute, looking at the closed door behind him, and passing his hand over his still flushed face. Presently he slowly and abstractedly ascended the flight of steps, entered the smaller passage that led to the back door of the shop and opened it.

He was at first a little startled at the halo of light from the still glowing stove, which the greater obscurity of the long room had heightened rather than diminished. Then he passed behind the counter, but here the box of biscuits which occupied the centre and cast a shadow over it compelled him to grope vaguely for what he sought. Then he stopped suddenly, the paper he had just found dropping from his fingers, and said sharply, —

"Who's there?"

"Me, pop."

"John Milton?"

"Yes, sir."

"What the devil are you doin' there, sir?"

"Readin'."

It was true. The boy was half reclining

in a most distorted posture on two chairs, his figure in deep shadow, but his book was raised above his head so as to catch the red glow of the stove on the printed page. Even then his father's angry interruption scarcely diverted his preoccupation; he raised himself in his chair mechanically, with his eyes still fixed on his book. Seeing which his father quickly regained the paper, but continued his objurgation.

"How dare you? Clear off to bed, will you! Do you hear me? Pretty goin's on," he added as if to justify his indignation. "Sneakin' in here and — and lyin' 'round at this time o' night! Why, if I had n't come in here to"—

"What?" asked the boy mechanically, catching vaguely at the unfinished sentence and staring automatically at the paper in his father's hand.

"Nothin', sir! Go to bed, I tell you! Will you? What are you standin' gawpin' at?" continued Harkutt furiously.

The boy regained his feet slowly and passed his father, but not without noticing with the same listless yet ineffaceable perception of childhood that he was hurriedly concealing the paper in his pocket. With

the same youthful inconsequence, wondering at this more than at the interruption, which was no novel event, he went slowly out of the room.

Harkutt listened to the retreating tread of his bare feet in the passage and then carefully locked the door. Taking the paper from his pocket, and borrowing the idea he had just objurgated in his son, he turned it towards the dull glow of the stove and attempted to read it. But perhaps lacking the patience as well as the keener sight of youth, he was forced to relight the candle which he had left on the counter, and reperused the paper. Yes! there was certainly no mistake! Here was the actual description of the property which the surveyor had just indicated as the future terminus of the new railroad, and here it was conveyed to him — Daniel Harkutt! What was that? Somebody knocking? What did this continual interruption mean? An odd superstitious fear now mingled with his irritation.

The sound appeared to come from the front shutters. It suddenly occurred to him that the light might be visible through the crevices. He hurriedly extinguished it, and went to the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Me, — Peters. Want to speak to you.”

Mr. Harkutt with evident reluctance drew the bolts. The wind, still boisterous and besieging, did the rest, and precipitately propelled Peters through the carefully guarded opening. But his surprise at finding himself in the darkness seemed to forestall any explanation of his visit.

“Well,” he said with an odd mingling of reproach and suspicion. “I declare I saw a light here just this minit! That’s queer.”

“Yes, I put it out just now. I was goin’ away,” replied Harkutt, with ill-disguised impatience.

“What! been here ever since?”

“No,” said Harkutt curtly.

“Well, I want to speak to ye about ’Lige. Seein’ the candle shinin’ through the chinks I thought he might be still with ye. If he ain’t, it looks bad. Light up, can’t ye! I want to show you something.”

There was a peremptoriness in his tone that struck Harkutt disagreeably, but observing that he was carrying something in his hand, he somewhat nervously re-lit the candle and faced him. Peters had a hat in his hand. It was ’Lige’s!

“’Bout an hour after we fellers left here,” said Peters, “I heard the rattlin’ of hoofs on the road, and then it seemed to stop just by my house. I went out with a lantern, and, darn my skin! if there war n’t ’Lige’s hoss, the saddle empty, and ’Lige nowhere! I looked round and called him — but no-thing were to be seen. Thinkin’ he might have slipped off — tho’ ez a general rule drunken men don’t, and he is a good rider — I followed down the road, lookin’ for him. I kept on follerin’ it down to your run, half a mile below.”

“But,” began Harkutt, with a quick nervous laugh, “you don’t reckon that because of that he” —

“Hold on!” said Peters, grimly producing a revolver from his side-pocket with the stock and barrel clogged and streaked with mud. “I found *that* too, — and look! one barrel discharged! And,” he added hurriedly, as approaching a climax, “look ye, — what I nat’rally took for wet from the rain — inside that hat — was — blood!”

“Nonsense!” said Harkutt, putting the hat aside with a new fastidiousness. “You don’t think” —

“I think,” said Peters, lowering his voice,

"I think, by God! *he's bin and done it!*"

"No!"

"Sure! Oh, it's all very well for Billings and the rest of that conceited crowd to sneer and sling their ideas of 'Lige gen'rally as they did jess now here, — but I'd like 'em to see *that*." It was difficult to tell if Mr. Peters' triumphant delight in confuting his late companions' theories had not even usurped in his mind the importance of the news he brought, as it had of any human sympathy with it.

"Look here," returned Harkutt earnestly, yet with a singularly cleared brow and a more natural manner. "You ought to take them things over to Squire Kerby's, right off, and show 'em to him. You kin tell him how you left 'Lige here, and say that I can prove by my daughter that he went away about ten minutes after, — at least, not more than fifteen." Like all unprofessional humanity, Mr. Harkutt had an exaggerated conception of the majesty of unimportant detail in the eye of the law. "I'd go with you myself," he added quickly, "but I've got company — strangers — here."

"How did he look when he left, — kinder wild?" suggested Peters.

Harkutt had begun to feel the prudence of present reticence. "Well," he said, cautiously, "*you* saw how he looked."

"You was n't rough with him? — that might have sent him off, you know," said Peters.

"No," said Harkutt, forgetting himself in a quick indignation, "no, I not only treated him to another drink, but gave him" — he stopped suddenly and awkwardly.

"Eh?" said Peters.

"Some good advice, — you know," said Harkutt, hastily. "But come, you'd better hurry over to the squire's. You know *you*'ve made the discovery; *your* evidence is important, and there's a law that obliges you to give information at once."

The excitement of discovery and the triumph over his disputants being spent, Peters, after the Sidon fashion, evidently did not relish activity as a duty. "You know," he said dubiously, "he might n't be dead, after all."

Harkutt became a trifle distant. "You know your own opinion of the thing," he replied after a pause. "You've circumstantial evidence enough to see the squire, and set others to work on it; and," he added

significantly, "you've done your share then, and can wipe your hands of it, eh?"

"That's so," said Peters, eagerly. "I'll just run over to the squire."

"And on account of the women folks, you know, and the strangers here, I'll say nothin' about it to-night," added Harkutt.

Peters nodded his head, and taking up the hat of the unfortunate Elijah with a certain hesitation, as if he feared it had already lost its dramatic intensity as a witness, disappeared into the storm and darkness again. A lurking gust of wind lying in ambush somewhere seemed to swoop down on him as if to prevent further indecision and whirl him away in the direction of the justice's house; and Mr. Harkutt shut the door, bolted it, and walked aimlessly back to the counter.

From a slow, deliberate and cautious man, he seemed to have changed within an hour to an irresolute and capricious one. He took the paper from his pocket, and, unlocking the money drawer of his counter, folded into a small compass that which now seemed to be the last testament of Elijah Curtis, and placed it in a recess. Then he went to the back door and paused, then returned, re-opened the money drawer, took out the

paper and again buttoned it in his hip pocket, standing by the stove and staring abstractedly at the dull glow of the fire. He even went through the mechanical process of raking down the ashes, — solely to gain time and as an excuse for delaying some other necessary action.

He was thinking what he should do. Had the question of his right to retain and make use of that paper been squarely offered to him an hour ago, he would without doubt have decided that he ought not to keep it. Even now, looking at it as an abstract principle, he did not deceive himself in the least. But Nature has the reprehensible habit of not presenting these questions to us squarely and fairly, and it is remarkable that in most of our offending the abstract principle is never the direct issue. Mr. Harkutt was conscious of having been unwillingly led step by step into a difficult, not to say dishonest, situation, and against his own seeking. He had never asked Elijah to sell him the property; he had distinctly declined it; it had even been forced upon him as security for the pittance he so freely gave him. This proved (to himself) that he himself was honest; it was only the circumstances

that were queer. Of course if Elijah had lived, he, Harkutt, might have tried to drive some bargain with him before the news of the railroad survey came out — for *that* was only business. But now that Elijah was dead, who would be a penny the worse or better but himself if he chose to consider the whole thing as a lucky speculation, and his gift of five dollars as the price he paid for it? Nobody could think that he had calculated upon 'Lige's suicide, any more than that the property would become valuable. In fact if it came to that, if 'Lige had really contemplated killing himself as a hopeless bankrupt after taking Harkutt's money as a loan, it was a swindle on his — Harkutt's — good-nature. He worked himself into a rage, which he felt was innately virtuous, at this tyranny of cold principle over his own warm-hearted instincts, but if it came to the *law*, he'd stand by law and not sentiment. He'd just let them — by which he vaguely meant the world, Tasajara, and possibly his own conscience — see that he was n't a sentimental fool, and he'd freeze on to that paper and that property!

Only he ought to have spoken out before. He ought to have told the surveyor at once

that he owned the land. He ought to have said: "Why, that's my land. I bought it of that drunken 'Lige Curtis for a song and out of charity." Yes, that was the only real trouble, and that came from his own goodness, his own extravagant sense of justice and right, — his own cursed good-nature. Yet, on second thoughts, he didn't know why he was obliged to tell the surveyor. Time enough when the company wanted to buy the land. As soon as it was settled that 'Lige was dead he'd openly claim the property. But what if he was n't dead? or they could n't find his body? or he had only disappeared? His plain, matter-of-fact face contracted and darkened. Of course he could n't ask the company to wait for him to settle that point. He had the power to dispose of the property under that paper, and — he should do it. If 'Lige turned up, that was another matter, and he and 'Lige could arrange it between them. He was quite firm here, and oddly enough quite relieved in getting rid of what appeared only a simple question of detail. He never suspected that he was contemplating the one irretrievable step, and summarily dismissing the whole ethical question.

He turned away from the stove, opened the back door, and walked with a more determined step through the passage to the sitting-room. But here he halted again on the threshold with a quick return of his old habits of caution. The door was slightly open; apparently his angry outbreak of an hour ago had not affected the spirits of his daughters, for he could hear their hilarious voices mingling with those of the strangers. They were evidently still fortune-telling, but this time it was the prophetic and divining accents of Mr. Rice addressed to Clementina which were now plainly audible.

“I see heaps of money and a great many friends in the change that is coming to you. Dear me! how many suitors! But I cannot promise you any marriage as brilliant as my friend has just offered your sister. You may be certain, however, that you’ll have your own choice in this, as you have in all things.”

“Thank you for nothing,” said Clementina’s voice. “But what are those horrid black cards beside them?—that’s trouble, I’m sure.”

“Not for you, though near you. Perhaps some one you don’t care much for and don’t

understand will have a heap of trouble on your account, — yes, on account of these very riches; see, he follows the ten of diamonds. It may be a suitor; it may be some one now in the house, perhaps.”

“He means himself, Miss Clementina,” struck in Grant’s voice laughingly.

“You ’re not listening, Miss Harkutt,” said Rice with half-serious reproach. “Perhaps you know who it is?”

But Miss Clementina’s reply was simply a hurried recognition of her father’s pale face that here suddenly confronted her with the opening door.

“Why, it ’s father!”

CHAPTER III.

IN his strange mental condition even the change from Harkutt's feeble candle to the outer darkness for a moment blinded Elijah Curtis, yet it was part of that mental condition that he kept moving steadily forward as in a trance or dream, though at first purposelessly. Then it occurred to him that he was really looking for his horse, and that the animal was not there. This for a moment confused and frightened him, first with the supposition that he had not brought him at all, but that it was part of his delusion; secondly, with the conviction that without his horse he could neither proceed on the course suggested by Harkutt, nor take another more vague one that was dimly in his mind. Yet in his hopeless vacillation it seemed a relief that now neither was practicable, and that he need do nothing. Perhaps it was a mysterious providence!

The explanation, however, was much simpler. The horse had been taken by the

luxurious and indolent Billings unknown to his companions. Overcome at the dreadful prospect of walking home in that weather, this perfect product of lethargic Sidon had artfully allowed Peters and Wingate to precede him, and, cautiously unloosing the tethered animal, had safely passed them in the darkness. When he gained his own inclosure he had lazily dismounted, and, with a sharp cut on the mustang's haunches, sent him galloping back to rejoin his master, with what result has been already told by the unsuspecting Peters in the preceding chapter.

Yet no conception of this possibility entered 'Lige Curtis's alcoholized consciousness, part of whose morbid phantasy it was to distort or exaggerate all natural phenomena. He had a vague idea that he could not go back to Harkutt's; already his visit seemed to have happened long, long ago, and could not be repeated. He would walk on, enwrapped in this uncompromising darkness which concealed everything, suggested everything, and was responsible for everything.

It was very dark, for the wind, having lulled, no longer thinned the veil of clouds above, nor dissipated a steaming mist that

appeared to rise from the sodden plain. Yet he moved easily through the darkness, seeming to be upheld by it as something tangible, upon which he might lean. At times he thought he heard voices, — not a particular voice he was thinking of, but strange voices — of course unreal to his present fancy. And then he heard one of these voices, unlike any voice in Sidon, and very faint and far off, asking if it “was anywhere near Sidon?” — evidently some one lost like himself. He answered in a voice that seemed quite as unreal and as faint, and turned in the direction from which it came. There was a light moving like a will-o'-the-wisp far before him, yet below him as if coming out of the depths of the earth. It must be fancy, but he would see — ah!

He had fallen violently forward, and at the same moment felt his revolver leap from his breast pocket like a living thing, and an instant after explode upon the rock where it struck, blindingly illuminating the declivity down which he was plunging. The sulphurous sting of burning powder was in his eyes and nose, yet in that swift revealing flash he had time to clutch the stems of a trailing vine beside him, but not to save his head

from sharp contact with the same rocky ledge that had caught his pistol. The pain and shock gave way to a sickening sense of warmth at the roots of his hair. Giddy and faint, his fingers relaxed, he felt himself sinking, with a languor that was half acquiescence, down, down, — until, with another shock, a wild gasping for air, and a swift reaction, he awoke in the cold, rushing water !

Clear and perfectly conscious now, though frantically fighting for existence with the current, he could dimly see a floating black object shooting by the shore, at times striking the projections of the bank, until in its recoil it swung half round and drifted broadside on towards him. He was near enough to catch the frayed ends of a trailing rope that fastened the structure, which seemed to be a few logs, together. With a convulsive effort he at last gained a footing upon it, and then fell fainting along its length. It was the raft which the surveyors from the *embarcadero* had just abandoned.

He did not know this, nor would he have thought it otherwise strange that a raft might be a part of the drift of the overflow, even had he been entirely conscious ; but his senses were failing, though he was still able

to keep a secure position on the raft, and to vaguely believe that it would carry him to some relief and succor. How long he lay unconscious he never knew; in his after-recollections of that night, it seemed to have been haunted by dreams of passing dim banks and strange places; of a face and voice that had been pleasant to him; of a terror coming upon him as he appeared to be nearing a place like that home that he had abandoned in the lonely *tules*. He was roused at last by a violent headache, as if his soft felt hat had been changed into a tightening crown of iron. Lifting his hand to his head to tear off its covering, he was surprised to find that he was wearing no hat, but that his matted hair, stiffened and dried with blood and ooze, was clinging like a cap to his skull in the hot morning sunlight. His eyelids and lashes were glued together and weighted down by the same sanguinary plaster. He crawled to the edge of his frail raft, not without difficulty, for it oscillated and rocked strangely, and dipped his hand in the current. When he had cleared his eyes he lifted them with a shock of amazement. Creeks, banks, and plain had disappeared; he was alone on a bend of the tossing bay of San Francisco:

His first and only sense — cleared by fasting and quickened by reaction — was one of infinite relief. He was not only free from the vague terrors of the preceding days and nights, but his whole past seemed to be lost and sunk forever in this illimitable expanse. The low plain of Tasajara, with its steadfast monotony of light and shadow, had sunk beneath another level, but one that glistened, sparkled, was instinct with varying life, and moved and even danced below him. The low palisades of regularly recurring *tules* that had fenced in, impeded, but never relieved the blankness of his horizon, were forever swallowed up behind him. All trail of past degradation, all record of pain and suffering, all footprints of his wandering and misguided feet were smoothly wiped out in that obliterating sea. He was physically helpless, and he felt it; he was in danger, and he knew it, — but he was free!

Happily there was but little wind and the sea was slight. The raft was still intact so far as he could judge, but even in his ignorance he knew it would scarcely stand the surges of the lower bay. Like most Californians who had passed the straits of Carquinez at night in a steamer, he did not

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recognize the locality, nor even the distant peak of Tamalpais. There were a few dotting sails that seemed as remote, as uncertain, and as unfriendly as sea birds. The raft was motionless, almost as motionless as he was in his cramped limbs and sundried, stiffened clothes. Too weak to keep an upright position, without mast, stick, or oar to lift a signal above that vast expanse, it seemed impossible for him to attract attention. Even his pistol was gone.

Suddenly, in an attempt to raise himself, he was struck by a flash so blinding that it seemed to pierce his aching eyes and brain and turned him sick. It appeared to come from a crevice between the logs at the further end of the raft. Creeping painfully towards it he saw that it was a triangular slip of highly polished metal that he had hitherto overlooked. He did not know that it was a "flashing" mirror used in topographical observation, which had slipped from the surveyors' instruments when they abandoned the raft, but his excited faculties instinctively detected its value to him. He lifted it, and, facing the sun, raised it at different angles with his feeble arms. But

the effort was too much for him; the raft presently seemed to be whirling with his movement, and he again fell.

.
“Ahoy there!”

The voice was close upon — in his very ears. He opened his eyes. The sea still stretched emptily before him; the dotting sails still unchanged and distant. Yet a strange shadow lay upon the raft. He turned his head with difficulty. On the opposite side — so close upon him as to be almost over his head — the great white sails of a schooner hovered above him like the wings of some enormous sea bird. Then a heavy boom swung across the raft, so low that it would have swept him away had he been in an upright position; the sides of the vessel grazed the raft and she fell slowly off. A terrible fear of abandonment took possession of him; he tried to speak, but could not. The vessel moved further away, but the raft followed! He could see now it was being held by a boat-hook, — could see the odd, eager curiosity on two faces that were raised above the taffrail, and with that sense of relief his eyes again closed in unconsciousness.

A feeling of chilliness, followed by a grateful sensation of drawing closer under some warm covering, a stinging taste in his mouth of fiery liquor and the aromatic steam of hot coffee, were his first returning sensations. His head and neck were swathed in coarse bandages, and his skin stiffened and smarting with soap. He was lying in a rude berth under a half-deck from which he could see the sky and the bellying sail, and presently a bearded face filled with rough and practical concern that peered down upon him.

“Hulloo! comin’ round, eh? Hold on!”

The next moment the stranger had leaped down beside Elijah. He seemed to be an odd mingling of the sailor and ranchero with the shrewdness of a seaport trader.

“Hulloo, boss! What was it? A free fight, or a wash-out?”

“A wash-out!”¹ Elijah grasped the idea as an inspiration. Yes, his cabin had been inundated, he had taken to a raft, had been knocked off twice or thrice, and had lost everything — even his revolver!

The man looked relieved. “Then it ain’t

¹ A mining term for the temporary inundation of a claim by flood; also used for the sterilizing effect of flood on fertile soil.

a free fight, nor havin' your crust busted and bein' robbed by beach combers, eh?"

"No," said Elijah, with his first faint smile.

"Glad o' that," said the man bluntly. "Then thar ain't no police business to tie up to in 'Frisco? We were stuck thar a week once, just because we chanced to pick up a feller who 'd been found gagged and then thrown overboard by wharf thieves. Had to dance attendance at court thar and lost our trip." He stopped and looked half-pathetically at the prostrate Elijah. "Look yer! ye ain't just dyin' to go ashore *now* and see yer friends and send messages, are ye?"

Elijah shuddered inwardly, but outwardly smiled faintly as he replied, "No!"

"And the tide and wind jest servin' us now, ye would n't mind keepin' straight on with us this trip?"

"Where to?" asked Elijah.

"Santy Barbara."

"No," said Elijah, after a moment's pause. "I'll go with you."

The man leaped to his feet, lifted his head above the upper deck, shouted "Let her go free, Jerry!" and then turned gratefully to his passenger. "Look yer! A wash-out is

a wash-out, I reckon, put it any way you like; it don't put anything back into the land, or anything back into your pocket afterwards, eh? No! And yer well out of it, pardner! Now there's a right smart chance for locatin' jest back of Santy Barbara, where thar ain't no God-forsaken *tules* to overflow; and ez far ez the land and licker lies ye 'need n't take any water in yours' ef ye don't want it. You kin start fresh thar, pardner, and brail up. What's the matter with you, old man, is only fever 'n' agur ketched in them *tules*! I kin see it in your eyes. Now you hold on whar you be till I go forrard and see everything taut, and then I'll come back and we'll have a talk."

And they did. The result of which was that at the end of a week's tossing and seasickness, Elijah Curtis was landed at Santa Barbara, pale, thin, but self-contained and resolute. And having found favor in the eyes of the skipper of the Kitty Hawk, general trader, lumber-dealer, and ranchman, a week later he was located on the skipper's land and installed in the skipper's service. And from that day, for five years, Sidon and Tasajara knew him no more.

CHAPTER IV.

It was part of the functions of John Milton Harkutt to take down the early morning shutters and sweep out the store for his father each day before going to school. It was a peculiarity of this performance that he was apt to linger over it, partly from the fact that it put off the evil hour of lessons, partly that he imparted into the process a purely imaginative and romantic element gathered from his latest novel-reading. In this he was usually assisted by one or two school-fellows on their way to school, who always envied him his superior menial occupation. To go to school, it was felt, was a common calamity of boyhood that called into play only the simplest forms of evasion, whereas to take down actual shutters in a *bona fide* store, and wield a real broom that raised a palpable cloud of dust, was something that really taxed the noblest exertions. And it was the morning after the arrival of the strangers that John Milton stood on the

veranda of the store ostentatiously examining the horizon, with his hand shading his eyes, as one of his companions appeared.

“Hollo, Milt! wot yer doin’?”

John Milton started dramatically, and then violently dashed at one of the shutters and began to detach it. “Ha!” he said hoarsely. “Clear the ship for action! Open the ports! On deck there! Steady, you lubbers!” In an instant his enthusiastic school-fellow was at his side attacking another shutter. “A long, low schooner bearing down upon us! Lively, lads, lively!” continued John Milton, desisting a moment to take another dramatic look at the distant plain. “How does she head now?” he demanded fiercely.

“Sou’ by sou’east, sir,” responded the other boy, frantically dancing before the window. “But she ’ll weather it.”

They each then wrested another shutter away, violently depositing them, as they ran to and fro, in a rack at the corner of the veranda. Added to an extraordinary and unnecessary clattering with their feet, they accompanied their movements with a singular hissing sound, supposed to indicate in one breath the fury of the elements, the bustle

of the eager crew, and the wild excitement of the coming conflict. When the last shutter was cleared away, John Milton, with the cry "Man the starboard guns!" dashed into the store, whose floor was marked by the muddy footprints of yesterday's buyers, seized a broom and began to sweep violently. A cloud of dust arose, into which his companion at once precipitated himself with another broom and a loud *bang!* to indicate the somewhat belated sound of cannon. For a few seconds the two boys plied their brooms desperately in that stifling atmosphere, accompanying each long sweep and puff of dust out of the open door with the report of explosions and loud *ha's!* of defiance, until not only the store, but the veranda was obscured with a cloud which the morning sun struggled vainly to pierce. In the midst of this tumult and dusty confusion — happily unheard and unsuspected in the secluded domestic interior of the building — a shrill little voice arose from the road.

"Think you 're mighty smart, don't ye?"

The two naval heroes stopped in their imaginary fury, and, as the dust of conflict cleared away, recognized little Johnny Peters

gazing at them with mingled inquisitiveness and envy.

“Guess ye don’t know what happened down the run last night,” he continued impatiently. “’Lige Curtis got killed, or killed hisself! Blood all over the rock down thar. Seed it, myseff. Dad picked up his six-shooter, — one barrel gone off. My dad was the first to find it out, and he ’s bin to Squire Kerby tellin’ him.”

The two companions, albeit burning with curiosity, affected indifference and pre-knowledge.

“Dad sez your father druv ’Lige outer the store lass night! Dad sez your father ’s ’sponsible. Dad sez your father ez good ez killed him. Dad sez the squire ’ll set the constable on your father. Yah!” But here the small insulter incontinently fled, pursued by both the boys. Nevertheless, when he had made good his escape, John Milton showed neither a disposition to take up his former nautical rôle, nor to follow his companion to visit the sanguinary scene of Elijah’s disappearance. He walked slowly back to the store and continued his work of sweeping and putting in order with an abstracted regularity, and no trace of his former exuberant spirits.

The first one of those instinctive fears which are common to imaginative children, and often assume the functions of premonition, had taken possession of him. The oddity of his father's manner the evening before, which had only half consciously made its indelible impression on his sensitive fancy, had recurred to him with Johnny Peters's speech. He had no idea of literally accepting the boy's charges; he scarcely understood their gravity; but he had a miserable feeling that his father's anger and excitement last night was because he had been discovered hunting in the dark for that paper of 'Lige Curtis's. It *was* 'Lige Curtis's paper, for he had seen it lying there. A sudden dreadful conviction came over him that he must never, never let any one know that he had seen his father take up that paper; that he must never admit it, even to *him*. It was not the boy's first knowledge of that attitude of hypocrisy which the grown-up world assumes towards childhood, and in which the innocent victims eventually acquiesce with a Machiavellian subtlety that at last avenges them, — but it was his first knowledge that that hypocrisy might not be so innocent. His father had concealed

something from him, because it was not right.

But if childhood does not forget, it seldom broods and is not above being diverted. And the two surveyors — of whose heroic advent in a raft John Milton had only heard that morning — with their traveled ways, their strange instruments and stranger talk, captured his fancy. Kept in the background by his sisters when visitors came, as an unrepresentable feature in the household, he however managed to linger near the strangers when, in company with Euphemia and Clementina, after breakfast they strolled beneath the sparkling sunlight in the rude garden inclosure along the sloping banks of the creek. It was with the average brother's supreme contempt that he listened to his sisters' "practicin'" upon the goodness of these superior beings ; it was with an exceptional pity that he regarded the evident admiration of the strangers in return. He felt that in the case of Euphemia, who sometimes evinced a laudable curiosity in his pleasures, and a flattering ignorance of his reading, this might be pardonable ; but what any one could find in the useless statuesque Clementina passed his comprehension. Could they

not see at once that she was "just that kind of person" who would lie abed in the morning, pretending she was sick, in order to make Phemie do the housework, and make him, John Milton, clean her boots and fetch things for her? Was it not perfectly plain to them that her present sickening politeness was solely with a view to extract from them caramels, rock-candy, and gum drops, which she would meanly keep herself, and perhaps some "buggy-riding" later? Alas, John Milton, it was not! For standing there with her tall, perfectly-proportioned figure outlined against a willow, an elastic branch of which she had drawn down by one curved arm above her head, and on which she leaned — as everybody leaned against something in Sidon — the two young men saw only a straying goddess in a glorified rosebud print. Whether the clearly-cut profile presented to Rice, or the full face that captivated Grant, each suggested possibilities of position, pride, poetry, and passion that astonished while it fascinated them. By one of those instincts known only to the freemasonry of the sex, Euphemia lent herself to this advertisement of her sister's charms by subtle comparison with her own prettinesses, and thus combined against their common enemy, man.

“Clementina certainly is perfect, to keep her supremacy over that pretty little sister,” thought Rice.

“What a fascinating little creature to hold her own against that tall, handsome girl,” thought Grant.

“They ’re takin’ stock o’ them two fellers so as to gabble about ’em when their backs is turned,” said John Milton gloomily to himself, with a dismal premonition of the prolonged tea-table gossip he would be obliged to listen to later.

“We were very fortunate to make a landing at all last night,” said Rice, looking down upon the still swollen current, and then raising his eyes to Clementina. “Still more fortunate to make it where we did. I suppose it must have been the singing that lured us on to the bank, — as, you know, the sirens used to lure people, — only with less disastrous consequences.”

John Milton here detected three glaring errors; first, it was *not* Clementina who had sung; secondly, he knew that neither of his sisters had ever read anything about sirens, but he had; thirdly, that the young surveyor was glaringly ignorant of local phenomena and should be corrected.

"It 's nothin' but the current," he said, with that feverish youthful haste that betrays a fatal experience of impending interruption. "It 's always leavin' drift and rubbish from everywhere here. There ain't anythin' that 's chucked into the creek above that ain't bound to fetch up on this bank. Why, there was two sheep and a dead hoss here long afore *you* thought of coming!" He did not understand why this should provoke the laughter that it did, and to prove that he had no ulterior meaning, added with pointed politeness, "*So it is n't your fault, you know — you could n't help it;*" supplementing this with the distinct courtesy, "otherwise you would n't have come."

"But it would seem that your visitors are not all as accidental as your brother would imply, and one, at least, seems to have been expected last evening. You remember you thought we were a Mr. Parmlee," said Mr. Rice looking at Clementina.

It would be strange indeed, he thought, if the beautiful girl were not surrounded by admirers. But without a trace of self-consciousness, or any change in her reposeful face, she indicated her sister with a slight gesture, and said: "One of Phemie's

friends. He gave her the accordion. She's very popular."

"And I suppose *you* are very hard to please?" he said with a tentative smile.

She looked at him with her large, clear eyes, and that absence of coquetry or changed expression in her beautiful face which might have stood for indifference or dignity as she said: "I don't know. I am waiting to see."

But here Miss Phemie broke in saucily with the assertion that Mr. Parmlee might not have a railroad in his pocket, but that at least he did n't have to wait for the Flood to call on young ladies, nor did he usually come in pairs, for all the world as if he had been let out of Noah's Ark, but on horseback and like a Christian by the front door. All this provokingly and bewitchingly delivered, however, and with a simulated exaggeration that was incited apparently more by Mr. Lawrence Grant's evident enjoyment of it, than by any desire to defend the absent Parmlee.

"But where is the front door?" asked Grant laughingly.

The young girl pointed to a narrow zigzag path that ran up the bank beside the

house until it stopped at a small picketed gate on the level of the road and store.

"But I should think it would be easier to have a door and private passage through the store," said Grant.

"*We* don't," said the young lady pertly, "we have nothing to do with the store. I go in to see paw sometimes when he's shutting up and there's nobody there, but Clem has never set foot in it since we came. It's bad enough to have it and the lazy loafers that hang around it as near to us as they are; but paw built the house in such a fashion that we ain't troubled by their noise, and we might be t' other side of the creek as far as our having to come across them. And because paw has to sell pork and flour, we have n't any call to go there and watch him do it."

The two men glanced at each other. This reserve and fastidiousness were something rare in a pioneer community. Harkutt's manners certainly did not indicate that he was troubled by this sensitiveness; it must have been some individual temperament of his daughters. Stephen felt his respect increase for the goddess-like Clementina; Mr. Lawrence Grant looked at Miss Phemie with a critical smile.

"But you must be very limited in your company," he said; "or is Mr. Parmlee not a customer of your father's?"

"As Mr. Parmlee does not come to us through the store, and don't talk trade to me, we don't know," responded Phemie saucily.

"But have you no lady acquaintances — neighbors — who also avoid the store and enter only at the straight and narrow gate up there?" continued Grant mischievously, regardless of the uneasy, half-reproachful glances of Rice.

But Phemie, triumphantly oblivious of any satire, answered promptly: "If you mean the Pike County Billingses who live on the turnpike road as much as they do off it, or the six daughters of that Georgia Cracker who wear men's boots and hats, we have n't."

"And Mr. Parmlee, your admirer?" suggested Rice. "Has n't he a mother or sisters here?"

"Yes, but they don't want to know us, and have never called here."

The embarrassment of the questioner at this unexpected reply, which came from the faultless lips of Clementina, was somewhat

mitigated by the fact that the young woman's voice and manner betrayed neither annoyance nor anger.

Here, however, Harkutt appeared from the house with the information that he had secured two horses for the surveyors and their instruments, and that he would himself accompany them a part of the way on their return to Tasajara Creek, to show them the road. His usual listless deliberation had given way to a certain nervous but uneasy energy. If they started at once it would be better, before the loungers gathered at the store and confused them with lazy counsel and languid curiosity. He took it for granted that Mr. Grant wished the railroad survey to be a secret, and he had said nothing, as they would be pestered with questions. "Sidon was inquisitive — and old-fashioned." The benefit its inhabitants would get from the railroad would not prevent them from throwing obstacles in its way at first; he remembered the way they had acted with a proposed wagon road, — in fact, an idea of his own, something like the railroad; he knew them thoroughly, and if he might advise them, it would be to say nothing here until the thing was settled.

"He evidently does not intend to give us a chance," said Grant good-humoredly to his companion, as they turned to prepare for their journey; "we are to be conducted in silence to the outskirts of the town like horse-thieves."

"But you gave him the tip for himself," said Rice reproachfully; "you cannot blame him for wanting to keep it."

"I gave it to him in trust for his two incredible daughters," said Grant with a grimace. "But, hang it! if I don't believe the fellow has more concern in it than I imagined."

"But is n't she perfect?" said Rice, with charming abstraction.

"Who?"

"Clementina, and so unlike her father."

"Discomposingly so," said Grant quietly. "One feels in calling her 'Miss Harkutt' as if one were touching upon a manifest indiscretion. But here comes John Milton. Well, my lad, what can I do for you?"

The boy, who had been regarding them from a distance with wistful and curious eyes as they replaced their instruments for the journey, had gradually approached them. After a moment's hesitation he said,

looking at Grant: "You don't know anybody in this kind o' business," pointing to the instruments, "who 'd like a boy, about my size?"

"I'm afraid not, J. M.," said Grant, cheerfully, without suspending his operation. "The fact is, you see, it's not exactly the kind of work for a boy of your size."

John Milton was silent for a moment, shifting himself slowly from one leg to another as he watched the surveyor. After a pause he said, "There don't seem to be much show in this world for boys o' my size. There don't seem to be much use for 'em any way." This not bitterly, but philosophically, and even politely, as if to relieve Grant's rejection of any incivility.

"Really you quite pain me, John Milton," said Grant, looking up as he tightened a buckle. "I never thought of it before, but you're right."

"Now," continued the boy slowly, "with girls it's just different. Girls of my size everybody does things for. There's Clemmy, — she's only two years older nor me, and don't know half that I do, and yet she kin lie about all day, and has n't to get up to breakfast. And Phemie, — who's jest the

same age, size, and weight as me, — maw and paw lets her do everything she wants to. And so does everybody. And so would you.”

“But you surely don’t want to be like a girl?” said Grant, smiling.

It here occurred to John Milton’s youthful but not illogical mind that this was not argument, and he turned disappointedly away. As his father was to accompany the strangers a short distance, he, John Milton, was to-day left in charge of the store. That duty, however, did not involve any pecuniary transactions — the taking of money or making of change — but a simple record on a slate behind the counter of articles selected by those customers whose urgent needs could not wait Mr. Harkutt’s return. Perhaps on account of this degrading limitation, perhaps for other reasons, the boy did not fancy the task imposed upon him. The presence of the idle loungers who usually occupied the armchairs near the stove, and occasionally the counter, dissipated any romance with which he might have invested his charge; he wearied of the monotony of their dull gossip, but mostly he loathed the attitude of hypercritical counsel and instruction which

they saw fit to assume towards him at such moments. "Instead o' lazin' thar behind the counter when your father ain't here to see ye, John," remarked Billings from the depths of his armchair a few moments after Harkutt had ridden away, "ye orter be bustlin' round, dustin' the shelves. Ye'll never come to anythin' when you're a man ef you go on like that. Ye never heard o' Harry Clay — that was called 'the Mill-boy of the Slashes' — sittin' down doin' nothin' when he was a boy."

"I never heard of him loafin' round in a grocery store when he was growned up either," responded John Milton, darkly.

"P'r'aps you reckon he got to be a great man by standin' up sassin' his father's customers," said Peters, angrily. "I kin tell ye, young man, if you was my boy" —

"If I was *your* boy, I'd be playin' hookey instead of goin' to school, jest as your boy is doin' now," interrupted John Milton, with a literal recollection of his quarrel and pursuit of the youth in question that morning.

An undignified silence on the part of the adults followed, the usual sequel to those passages; Sidon generally declining to expose itself to the youthful Harkutt's terrible accuracy of statement.

The men resumed their previous lazy gossip about Elijah Curtis's disappearance, with occasional mysterious allusions in a lower tone, which the boy instinctively knew referred to his father, but which either from indolence or caution, the two great conservators of Sidon, were never formulated distinctly enough for his relentless interference. The morning sunshine was slowly thickening again in an indolent mist that seemed to rise from the saturated plain. A stray loungeur shuffled over from the blacksmith's shop to the store to take the place of another idler who had joined an equally lethargic circle around the slumbering forge. A dull intermittent sound of hammering came occasionally from the wheelwright's shed -- at sufficiently protracted intervals to indicate the enfeebled progress of Sidon's vehicular repair. A yellow dog left his patch of sunlight on the opposite side of the way and walked deliberately over to what appeared to be more luxurious quarters on the veranda; was manifestly disappointed but not equal to the exertion of returning, and sank down with blinking eyes and a regretful sigh without going further. A procession of six ducks got well into a line

for a laborious "march past" the store, but fell out at the first mud puddle and gave it up. A highly nervous but respectable hen, who had ventured upon the veranda evidently against her better instincts, walked painfully on tiptoe to the door, apparently was met by language which no mother of a family could listen to, and retired in strong hysterics. A little later the sun became again obscured, the wind arose, rain fell, and the opportunity for going indoors and doing nothing was once more availed of by all Sidon.

It was afternoon when Mr. Harkutt returned. He did not go into the store, but entered the dwelling from the little picket-gate and steep path. There he called a family council in the sitting-room as being the most reserved and secure. Mrs. Harkutt, sympathizing and cheerfully ready for any affliction, still holding a dust-cloth in her hand, took her seat by the window, with Phemie breathless and sparkling at one side of her, while Clementina, all faultless profile and repose, sat on the other. To Mrs. Harkutt's motherly concern at John Milton's absence, it was pointed out that he was wanted at the store, — was a mere boy any-

how, and could not be trusted. Mr. Harkutt, a little ruddier from weather, excitement, and the unusual fortification of a glass of liquor, a little more rugged in the lines of his face, and with an odd ring of defiant self-assertion in his voice, stood before them in the centre of the room.

He wanted them to listen to him carefully, to remember what he said, for it was important; it might be a matter of "lawing" hereafter, — and he could n't be always repeating it to them, — he would have enough to do. There was a heap of it that, as women-folks, they could n't understand, and were n't expected to. But he 'd got it all clear now, and what he was saying was gospel. He 'd always known to himself that the only good that could ever come to Sidon would come by railroad. When those fools talked wagon road he had said nothing, but he had his own ideas; he had worked for that idea without saying anything to anybody; that idea was to get possession of all the land along the *embarcadero*, which nobody cared for, and 'Lige Curtis was ready to sell for a song. Well, now, considering what had happened, he did n't mind telling them that he had been gradually getting

possession of it, little by little, paying 'Lige Curtis in advances and installments, until it was his own! They had heard what those surveyors said; how that it was the only fit terminus for the railroad. Well, that land, and that water-front, and the terminus were *his!* And all from his own foresight and prudence.

It is needless to say that this was not the truth. But it is necessary to point out that this fabrication was the result of his last night's cogitations and his morning's experience. He had resolved upon a bold course. He had reflected that his neighbors would be more ready to believe in and to respect a hard, mercenary, and speculative foresight in his taking advantage of 'Lige's necessities than if he had — as was the case — merely benefited by them through an accident of circumstance and good humor. In the latter case he would be envied and hated; in the former he would be envied and feared. By logic of circumstance the greater wrong seemed to be less obviously offensive than the minor fault. It was true that it involved the doing of something he had not contemplated, and the certainty of exposure if 'Lige ever returned, but he was nevertheless

resolved. The step from passive to active wrong-doing is not only easy, it is often a relief; it is that return to sincerity which we all require. Howbeit, it gave that ring of assertion to Daniel Harkutt's voice already noted, which most women like, and only men are prone to suspect or challenge. The incompleteness of his statement was, for the same reason, overlooked by his feminine auditors.

"And what is it worth, dad?" asked Phemie eagerly.

"Grant says I oughter get at least ten thousand dollars for the site of the terminus from the company, but of course I shall hold on to the rest of the land. The moment they get the terminus there, and the depot and wharf built, I can get my own price and buyers for the rest. Before the year is out Grant thinks it ought to go up ten per cent on the value of the terminus, and that a hundred thousand."

"Oh, dad!" gasped Phemie, frantically clasping her knees with both hands as if to perfectly assure herself of this good fortune.

Mrs. Harkutt audibly murmured "Poor dear Dan'l," and stood, as it were, sympathetically by, ready to commiserate the pains

and anxieties of wealth as she had those of poverty. Clementina alone remained silent, clear-eyed, and unchanged.

"And to think it all came through *them*!" continued Phemie. "I always had an idea that Mr. Grant was smart, dad. And it was real kind of him to tell you."

"I reckon father could have found it out without them. I don't know why we should be beholden to them particularly. I hope he is n't expected to let them think that he is bound to consider them our intimate friends just because they happened to drop in here at a time when his plans have succeeded."

The voice was Clementina's, unexpected but quiet, unemotional and convincing. "It seemed," as Mrs. Harkutt afterwards said, "as if the child had already touched that hundred thousand." Phemie reddened with a sense of convicted youthful extravagance.

"You need n't fear for me," said Harkutt, responding to Clementina's voice as if it were an echo of his own, and instinctively recognizing an unexpected ally. "I've got my own ideas of this thing, and what's to come of it. I've got my own ideas of openin' up that property and showin' its re-

sources. I'm goin' to run it my own way. I'm goin' to have a town along the *embarcadero* that'll lay over any town in Contra Costa. I'm goin' to have the court-house and county seat there, and a couple of hotels as good as any in the Bay. I'm goin' to build that wagon road through here that those lazy louts slipped up on, and carry it clear over to Five Mile Corner, and open up the whole Tasajara Plain!"

They had never seen him look so strong, so resolute, so intelligent and handsome. A dimly prophetic vision of him in a black broadcloth suit and gold watch-chain addressing a vague multitude, as she remembered to have seen the Hon. Stanley Riggs of Alasco at the "Great Barbecue," rose before Phemie's blue enraptured eyes. With the exception of Mrs. Harkutt, — equal to any possibilities on the part of her husband, — they had honestly never expected it of him. They were pleased with their father's attitude in prosperity, and felt that perhaps he was not unworthy of being proud of them hereafter.

"But we're goin' to leave Sidon," said Phemie, "ain't we, paw?"

"As soon as I can run up a new house at

the *embarcadero*," said Harkutt peevishly, "and that's got to be done mighty quick if I want to make a show to the company and be in possession."

"And that's easier for you to do, dear, now that 'Lige's disappeared," said Mrs. Harkutt consolingly.

"What do ye mean by that? What the devil are ye talkin' about?" demanded Harkutt suddenly with unexpected exasperation.

"I mean that that drunken 'Lige would be mighty poor company for the girls if he was our only neighbor," returned Mrs. Harkutt submissively.

Harkutt, after a fixed survey of his wife, appeared mollified. The two girls, who were mindful of his previous outburst the evening before, exchanged glances which implied that his manners needed correction for prosperity.

"You'll want a heap o' money to build there, Dan'l," said Mrs. Harkutt in plaintive diffidence.

"Yes! Yes!" said Harkutt impatiently. "I've kalkilated all that, and I'm goin' to 'Frisco to-morrow to raise it and put this bill of sale on record." He half drew Elijah Curtis's paper from his pocket, but paused and put it back again.

"Then *that was* the paper, dad," said Phemie triumphantly.

"Yes," said her father, regarding her fixedly, "and you know now why I did n't want anything said about it last night — nor even now."

"And 'Lige had just given it to you! Was n't it lucky?"

"He *had n't* just given it to me!" said her father with another unexpected outburst. "God Amighty! ain't I tellin' you all the time it was an old matter! But you jabber, jabber all the time and don't listen! Where's John Milton?" It had occurred to him that the boy might have read the paper — as his sister had — while it lay unheeded on the counter.

"In the store, — you know. You said he was n't to hear anything of this, but I'll call him," said Mrs. Harkutt, rising eagerly.

"Never mind," returned her husband, stopping her reflectively, "best leave it as it is; if it's necessary I'll tell him. But don't any of you say anything, do you hear?"

Nevertheless a few hours later, when the store was momentarily free of loungers, and Harkutt had relieved his son of his monotonous charge, he made a pretense, while

abstractedly listening to an account of the boy's stewardship, to look through a drawer as if in search of some missing article.

"You did n't see anything of a paper I left somewhere about here yesterday?" he asked carelessly.

"The one you picked up when you came in last night?" said the boy with discomposing directness.

Harkutt flushed slightly and drew his breath between his set teeth. Not only could he place no reliance upon ordinary youthful inattention, but he must be on his guard against his own son as from a spy! But he restrained himself.

"I don't remember," he said with affected deliberation, "what it was I picked up. Do you? Did you read it?"

The meaning of his father's attitude instinctively flashed upon the boy. He *had* read the paper, but he answered, as he had already determined, "No."

An inspiration seized Mr. Harkutt. He drew 'Lige Curtis's bill of sale from his pocket, and opening it before John Milton said, "Was it that?"

"I don't know," said the boy. "I could n't tell." He walked away with

affected carelessness, already with a sense of playing some part like his father, and pretended to whistle for the dog across the street. Harkutt coughed ostentatiously, put the paper back in his pocket, set one or two boxes straight on the counter, locked the drawer, and disappeared into the back passage. John Milton remained standing in the doorway looking vacantly out. But he did not see the dull familiar prospect beyond. He only saw the paper his father had opened and unfolded before him. It was the same paper he had read last night. But there were three words written there *that were not there before!* After the words "Value received" there had been a blank. He remembered that distinctly. This was filled in by the words, "Five hundred dollars." The handwriting did not seem like his father's, nor yet entirely like 'Lige Curtis's. What it meant he did not know, — he would not try to think. He should forget it, as he had tried to forget what had happened before, and he should never tell it to any one!

There was a feverish gayety in his sisters' manner that afternoon that he did not understand; short colloquies that were suspended with ill concealed impatience when he came

near them, and resumed when he was sent, on equally palpable excuses, out of the room. He had been accustomed to this exclusion when there were strangers present, but it seemed odd to him now, when the conversation did not even turn upon the two superior visitors who had been there, and of whom he confidently expected they would talk. Such fragments as he overheard were always in the future tense, and referred to what they intended to do. His mother, whose affection for him had always been shown in excessive and depressing commiseration of him in even his lightest moments, that afternoon seemed to add a prophetic and Cassandra-like sympathy for some vague future of his that would require all her ministration. "You won't need them new boots, Miltie dear, in the changes that may be comin' to ye; so don't be bothering your poor father in his worriments over his new plans."

"What new plans, mommer?" asked the boy abruptly. "Are we goin' away from here?"

"Hush, dear, and don't ask questions that's enough for grown folks to worry over, let alone a boy like you. Now be good," — a quality in Mrs. Harkutt's mind synony-

mous with ceasing from troubling, — “and after supper, while I ’m in the parlor with your father and sisters, you kin sit up here by the fire with your book.”

“But,” persisted the boy in a flash of inspiration, “is popper goin’ to join in business with those surveyors, — a surveyin’?”

“No, child, what an idea! Run away there, — and mind! — don’t bother your father.”

Nevertheless John Milton’s inspiration had taken a new and characteristic shape. All this, he reflected, had happened since the surveyors came — since they had weakly displayed such a shameless and unmanly interest in his sisters! It could have but one meaning. He hung around the sitting-room and passages until he eventually encountered Clementina, taller than ever, evidently wearing a guilty satisfaction in her face, engrafted upon that habitual bearing of hers which he had always recognized as belonging to a vague but objectionable race whose members were individually known to him as “a proudy.”

“Which of those two surveyor fellows is it, Clemmy?” he said with an engaging smile, yet halting at a strategic distance.

"Is what?"

"Wot you 're goin' to marry."

"Idiot!"

"That ain't tellin' which," responded the boy darkly.

Clementina swept by him into the sitting-room, where he heard her declare that "really that boy was getting too low and vulgar for anything." Yet it struck him, that being pressed for further explanation, she did *not* specify why. This was "girls' meanness!"

Howbeit he lingered late in the road that evening, hearing his father discuss with the search-party that had followed the banks of the creek, vainly looking for further traces of the missing 'Lige, the possibility of his being living or dead, of the body having been carried away by the current to the bay or turning up later in some distant marsh when the spring came with low water. One who had been to his cabin beside the *embarcadero* reported that it was, as had been long suspected, barely habitable, and contained neither books, papers, nor records which would indicate his family or friends. It was a God-forsaken, dreary, worthless place; he wondered how a white man could ever expect to make a living there. If

Elijah never turned up again it certainly would be a long time before any squatter would think of taking possession of it. John Milton knew instinctively, without looking up, that his father's eyes were fixed upon him, and he felt himself constrained to appear to be abstracted in gazing down the darkening road. Then he heard his father say, with what he felt was an equal assumption of carelessness : " Yes, I reckon I 've got somewhere a bill of sale of that land that I had to take from 'Lige for an old bill, but I kalkilate that 's all I 'll ever see of it."

Rain fell again as the darkness gathered, but he still loitered on the road and the sloping path of the garden, filled with a half resentful sense of wrong, and hugging with gloomy pride an increasing sense of loneliness and of getting dangerously wet. The swollen creek still whispered, murmured and swirled beside the bank. At another time he might have had wild ideas of emulating the surveyors on some extempore raft and so escaping his present dreary home existence ; but since the disappearance of 'Lige, who had always excited an odd boyish antipathy in his heart, although he had never seen him, he shunned the stream contaminated with the

missing man's unheroic fate. Presently the light from the open window of the sitting-room glittered on the wet leaves and sprays where he stood, and the voices of the family conclave came fitfully to his ear. They did n't want him there. They had never thought of asking him to come in. Well! — who cared? And he was n't going to be bought off with a candle and a seat by the kitchen fire. No!

Nevertheless he was getting wet to no purpose. There was the tool-house and carpenter's shed near the bank; its floor was thickly covered with sawdust and pine-wood shavings, and there was a mouldy buffalo skin which he had once transported thither from the old wagon-bed. There, too, was his secret *cache* of a candle in a bottle, buried with other piratical treasures in the presence of the youthful Peters, who consented to be sacrificed on the spot in buccaneering fashion to complete the unhallowed rites. He unearthed the candle, lit it, and clearing away a part of the shavings stood it up on the floor. He then brought a prized, battered, and coverless volume from a hidden recess in the rafters, and lying down with the buffalo robe over him, and his cap in his

hand ready to extinguish the light at the first footstep of a trespasser, gave himself up — as he had given himself up, I fear, many other times — to the enchantment of the page before him.

The current whispered, murmured, and sang, unheeded at his side. The voices of his mother and sisters, raised at times in eagerness or expectation of the future, fell upon his unlistening ears. For with the spell that had come upon him, the mean walls of his hiding-place melted away; the vulgar stream beside him might have been that dim, subterraneous river down which Sindbad and his bale of riches were swept out of the Cave of Death to the sunlight of life and fortune, so surely and so simply had it transported him beyond the cramped and darkened limits of his present life. He was in the better world of boyish romance, — of gallant deeds and high emprises; of miraculous atonement and devoted sacrifice; of brave men, and those rarer, impossible women, — the immaculate conception of a boy's virgin heart. What mattered it that behind that glittering window his mother and sisters grew feverish and excited over the vulgar details of their real but baser for-

tune? From the dark tool-shed by the muddy current, John Milton, with a battered dogs'-eared chronicle, soared on the wings of fancy far beyond their wildest ken!

CHAPTER V.

PROSPERITY had settled upon the plains of Tasajara. Not only had the *embarcadero* emerged from the *tules* of Tasajara Creek as a thriving town of steamboat wharves, warehouses, and outlying mills and factories, but in five years the transforming railroad had penetrated the great plain itself and revealed its undeveloped fertility. The low-lying lands that had been yearly overflowed by the creek, now drained and cultivated, yielded treasures of wheat and barley that were apparently inexhaustible. Even the helpless indolence of Sidon had been surprised into activity and change. There was nothing left of the straggling settlement to recall its former aspect. The site of Harkutt's old store and dwelling was lost and forgotten in the new mill and granary that rose along the banks of the creek. Decay leaves ruin and traces for the memory to linger over ; prosperity is unrelenting in its complete and smiling obliteration of the past.

But Tasajara City, as the *embarcadero* was now called, had no previous record, and even the former existence of an actual settler like the forgotten Elijah Curtis was unknown to the present inhabitants. It was Daniel Harkutt's idea carried out in Daniel Harkutt's land, with Daniel Harkutt's capital and energy. But Daniel Harkutt had become Daniel Harcourt, and Harcourt Avenue, Harcourt Square, and Harcourt House, ostentatiously proclaimed the new spelling of his patronymic. When the change was made and for what reason, who suggested it and under what authority, were not easy to determine, as the sign on his former store had borne nothing but the legend, *Goods and Provisions*, and his name did not appear on written record until after the occupation of Tasajara; but it is presumed that it was at the instigation of his daughters, and there was no one to oppose it. Harcourt was a pretty name for a street, a square, or a hotel; even the few in Sidon who had called it Harkutt admitted that it was an improvement quite consistent with the change from the fever-haunted *tules* and sedges of the creek to the broad, level, and handsome squares of Tasajara City.

This might have been the opinion of a visitor at the Harcourt House, who arrived one summer afternoon from the Stockton boat, but whose shrewd, half-critical, half-professional eyes and quiet questionings betrayed some previous knowledge of the locality. Seated on the broad veranda of the Harcourt House, and gazing out on the well-kept green and young eucalyptus trees of the Harcourt Square or Plaza, he had elicited a counter question from a prosperous-looking citizen who had been lounging at his side.

"I reckon you look ez if you might have been here before, stranger."

"Yes," said the stranger quietly, "I have been. But it was when the *tules* grew in the square opposite, and the tide of the creek washed them."

"Well," said the Tasajaran, looking curiously at the stranger, "I call myself a pioneer of Tasajara. My name's Peters, — of Peters and Co., — and those warehouses along the wharf, where you landed just now, are mine; but I was the first settler on Harcourt's land, and built the next cabin after him. I helped to clear out them *tules* and dredged the channels yonder. I took the contract with Harcourt to build the last fif-

teen miles o' railroad, and put up that depot for the company. Perhaps you were here before that?"

"I was," returned the stranger quietly.

"I say," said Peters, hitching his chair a little nearer to his companion, "you never knew a kind of broken-down feller, called Curtis — 'Lige Curtis — who once squatted here and sold his right to Harkutt? He disappeared; it was allowed he killed himself, but they never found his body, and, between you and me, I never took stock in that story. You know Harcourt holds under him, and all Tasajara rests on that title."

"I've heard so," assented the stranger carelessly, "but I never knew the original settler. Then Harcourt has been lucky?"

"You bet. He's got three millions right about *here*, or within this quarter section, to say nothing of his outside speculations."

"And lives here?"

"Not for two years. That's his old house across the plaza, but his women-folks live mostly in 'Frisco and New York, where he's got houses too. They say they sorter got sick of Tasajara after his youngest daughter ran off with a feller."

"Hallo!" said the stranger with undis-

guised interest. "I never heard of that! You don't mean that she eloped" — he hesitated.

"Oh, it was a square enough marriage. I reckon too square to suit some folks; but the fellow had n't nothin', and was n't worth shucks, — a sort of land surveyor, doin' odd jobs, you know; and the old man and old woman were agin it, and the tother daughter worse of all. It was allowed here — you know how women-folks talk! — that the surveyor had been sweet on Clementina, but had got tired of being played by her, and took up with Phemie out o' spite. Anyhow they got married, and Harcourt gave them to understand they could n't expect anything from him. P'raps that's why it did n't last long, for only about two months ago she got a divorce from Rice and came back to her family again."

"Rice?" queried the stranger. "Was that her husband's name, Stephen Rice?"

"I reckon! You knew him?"

"Yes, — when the tide came up to the *tules*, yonder," answered the stranger musingly. "And the other daughter, — I suppose she has made a good match, being a beauty and the sole heiress?"

The Tasajaran made a grimace. "Not much! I reckon she's waitin' for the Angel Gabriel, — there ain't another good enough to suit her here. They say she's had most of the big men in California waitin' in a line with their offers, like that cue the fellows used to make at the 'Frisco post-office steamer days — and she with nary a letter or answer for any of them."

"Then Harcourt does n't seem to have been as fortunate in his family affairs as in his speculations?"

Peters uttered a grim laugh. "Well, I reckon you know all about his son's stampeding with that girl last spring?"

"His son?" interrupted the stranger. "Do you mean the boy they called John Milton? Why, he was a mere child!"

"He was old enough to run away with a young woman that helped in his mother's house, and marry her afore a justice of the peace. The old man just snorted with rage, and swore he'd have the marriage put aside, for the boy was under age. He said it was a put-up job of the girl's; that she was older by two years, and only wanted to get what money might be comin' some day, but that they'd never see a red cent of it. Then, they

say, John Milton up and sassed the old man to his face, and allowed that he would n't take his dirty money if he starved first, and that if the old man broke the marriage he 'd marry her again next year; that true love and honorable poverty were better nor riches, and a lot more o' that stuff he picked out o' them ten-cent novels he was allus reading. My women-folks say that he actually liked the girl, because she was the only one in the house that was ever kind to him; they say the girls were just ragin' mad at the idea o' havin' a hired gal who had waited on 'em as a sister-in-law, and they even got old Mammy Harcourt's back up by sayin' that John's wife would want to rule the house, and run her out of her own kitchen. Some say he shook *them*, talked back to 'em mighty sharp, and held his head a heap higher nor them. Anyhow, he 's livin' with his wife somewhere in 'Frisco, in a shanty on a sand lot, and workin' odd jobs for the newspapers. No! takin' it by and large—it don't look as if Harcourt had run his family to the same advantage that he has his land."

"Perhaps he does n't understand them as well," said the stranger smiling.

"Mor 'n likely the material ain't thar, or

ain't as vallyble for a new country," said Peters grimly. "I reckon the trouble is that he lets them two daughters run him, and the man who lets any woman or women do that, lets himself in for all their meannesses, and all he gets in return is a woman's result, — show!"

Here the stranger, who was slowly rising from his chair with the polite suggestion of reluctantly tearing himself from the speaker's spell, said: "And Harcourt spends most of his time in San Francisco, I suppose?"

"Yes! but to-day he 's here to attend a directors' meeting and the opening of the Free Library and Tasajara Hall. I saw the windows open, and the blinds up in his house across the plaza as I passed just now."

The stranger had by this time quite effected his courteous withdrawal. "Good - afternoon, Mr. Peters," he said, smilingly lifting his hat, and turned away.

Peters, who was obliged to take his legs off the chair, and half rise to the stranger's politeness, here reflected that he did not know his interlocutor's name and business, and that he had really got nothing in return for his information. This must be remedied. As

the stranger passed through the hall into the street, followed by the unwonted civilities of the spruce hotel clerk and the obsequious attentions of the negro porter, Peters stepped to the window of the office. "Who was that man who just passed out?" he asked.

The clerk stared in undisguised astonishment. "You don't mean to say you did n't know *who* he was — all the while you were talking to him?"

"No," returned Peters, impatiently.

"Why, that was Professor Lawrence Grant! — *the* Lawrence Grant — don't you know? — the biggest scientific man and recognized expert on the Pacific slope. Why, that 's the man whose single word is enough to make or break the biggest mine or claim going! That man! — why, that 's the man whose opinion 's worth thousands, for it carries millions with it — and can't be bought. That 's him who knocked the bottom out of El Dorado last year, and next day sent Eureka up booming! Ye remember that, sure?"

"Of course — but" — stammered Peters.

"And to think you did n't know him!" repeated the hotel clerk wonderingly. "And here *I* was reckoning you were getting

points from him all the time ! Why, some men would have given a thousand dollars for your chance of talking to him—yes !—of even being *seen* talking to him. Why, old Wingate once got a tip on his Prairie Flower lead worth five thousand dollars while just changing seats with him in the cars and passing the time of day, sociable like. Why, what *did* you talk about ? ”

Peters, with a miserable conviction that he had thrown away a valuable opportunity in mere idle gossip, nevertheless endeavored to look mysterious as he replied, “ Oh, business gin’rally.” Then in the faint hope of yet retrieving his blunder he inquired, “ How long will he be here ? ”

“ Don’t know. I reckon he and Harcourt ’s got something on hand. He just asked if he was likely to be at home or at his office. I told him I reckoned at the house, for some of the family — I did n’t get to see who they were — drove up in a carriage from the 3.40 train while you were sitting there.”

Meanwhile the subject of this discussion, quite unconscious of the sensation he had created, or perhaps like most heroes philosophically careless of it, was sauntering in-

differently towards Harcourt's house. But he had no business with his former host, — his only object was to pass an idle hour before his train left. He was, of course, not unaware that he himself was largely responsible for Harcourt's success; that it was *his* hint which had induced the petty trader of Sidon to venture his all in Tasajara; *his* knowledge of the topography and geology of the plain that had stimulated Harcourt's agricultural speculations; *his* hydrographic survey of the creek that had made Harcourt's plan of widening the channel to commerce practicable and profitable. This he could not help but know. But that it was chiefly owing to his own clear, cool, far-seeing, but never visionary, scientific observation, — his own accurate analysis, unprejudiced by even a savant's enthusiasm, and uninfluenced by any personal desire or greed of gain, — that Tasajara City had risen from the stagnant *tules*, was a speculation that had never occurred to him. There was a much more uneasy consciousness of what he had done in Mr. Harcourt's face a few moments later, when his visitor's name was announced, and it is to be feared that if that name had been less widely honored and respected than it

was, no merely grateful recollection of it would have procured Grant an audience. As it was, it was with a frown and a touch of his old impatient asperity that he stepped to the threshold of an adjoining room and called, "Clemmy!"

Clementina appeared at the door.

"There 's that man Grant in the parlor. What brings *him* here, I wonder? Who does he come to see?"

"Who did he ask for?"

"Me, — but that don't mean anything."

"Perhaps he wants to see you on some business."

"No. That is n't his high-toned style. He makes other people go to him for that," he said bitterly. "Anyhow — don't you think it's mighty queer his coming here after his friend — for it was he who introduced Rice to us — had behaved so to your sister, and caused all this divorce and scandal?"

"Perhaps he may know nothing about it; he and Rice separated long ago, even before Grant became so famous. We never saw much of him, you know, after we came here. Suppose you leave him to *me*. I'll see him."

Mr. Harcourt reflected. "Did n't he used to be rather attentive to Phemie?"

Clementina shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "I dare say — but I don't think that *now*" —

"Who said anything about *now*?" retorted her father, with a return of his old abruptness. After a pause he said: "I'll go down and see him first, and then send for you. You can keep him for the opening and dinner, if you like."

Meantime Lawrence Grant, serenely unsuspecting of these domestic confidences, had been shown into the parlor — a large room furnished in the same style as the drawing-room of the hotel he had just quitted. He had ample time to note that it was that wonderful Second Empire furniture which he remembered that the early San Francisco pioneers in the first flush of their wealth had imported directly from France, and which for years after gave an unexpected foreign flavor to the western domesticity and a tawdry gilt equality to saloons and drawing-rooms, public and private. But he was observant of a corresponding change in Harcourt, when a moment later he entered the room. That individuality which had kept the former shop-keeper of Sidon distinct from, although per-

haps not superior to, his customers — was strongly marked. He was perhaps now more nervously alert than then ; he was certainly more impatient than before, — but that was pardonable in a man of large affairs and action. Grant could not deny that he seemed improved, — rather perhaps that the setting of fine clothes, cleanliness, and the absence of petty worries, made his characteristics respectable. That which is ill breeding in homespun, is apt to become mere eccentricity in purple and fine linen ; Grant felt that Harcourt jarred on him less than he did before, and was grateful without superciliousness. Harcourt, relieved to find that Grant was neither critical nor aggressively reminiscent, and above all not inclined to claim the credit of creating him and Tasajara, became more confident, more at his ease, and, I fear, in proportion more unpleasant. It is the repose and not the struggle of the parvenu that confounds us.

“ And *you*, Grant, — you have made yourself famous, and, I hear, have got pretty much your own prices for your opinions ever since it was known that you — you — er — were connected with the growth of Tasajara.”

Grant smiled ; he was not quite prepared for this ; but it was amusing and would pass the time. He murmured a sentence of half ironical deprecation, and Mr. Harcourt continued : —

“I have n’t got my San Francisco house here to receive you in, but I hope some day, sir, to see you there. We are only here for the day and night, but if you care to attend the opening ceremonies at the new hall, we can manage to give you dinner afterwards. You can escort my daughter Clementina, — she’s here with me.”

The smile of apologetic declination which had begun to form on Grant’s lips was suddenly arrested. “Then your daughter is here ?” he asked, with unaffected interest.

“Yes, — she is in fact a patroness of the library and sewing-circle, and takes the greatest interest in it. The Reverend Doctor Pilsbury relies upon her for everything. She runs the society, even to the training of the young ladies, sir. You shall see their exercises.”

This was certainly a new phase of Clementina’s character, Yet why should she not assume the rôle of Lady Bountiful with the other functions of her new condition. “I

should have thought Miss Harcourt would have found this rather difficult with her other social duties," he said, "and would have left it to her married sister." He thought it better not to appear as if avoiding reference to Euphemia, although quietly ignoring her late experiences. Mr. Harcourt was less easy in his response.

"Now that Euphemia is again with her own family," he said ponderously, with an affectation of social discrimination that was in weak contrast to his usual direct business astuteness, "I suppose she may take her part in these things, but just now she requires rest. You may have heard some rumor that she is going abroad for a time? The fact is she has n't the least intention of doing so, nor do we consider there is the slightest reason for her going." He paused as if to give great emphasis to a statement that seemed otherwise unimportant. "But here's Clementina coming, and I must get you to excuse *me*. I've to meet the trustees of the church in ten minutes, but I hope she'll persuade you to stay, and I'll see you later at the hall."

As Clementina entered the room her father vanished and, I fear, as completely

dropped out of Mr. Grant's mind. For the daughter's improvement was greater than her father's, yet so much more refined as to be at first only delicately perceptible. Grant had been prepared for the vulgar enhancement of fine clothes and personal adornment, for the specious setting of luxurious circumstances and surroundings, for the *aplomb* that came from flattery and conscious power. But he found none of these; her calm individuality was intensified rather than subdued; she was dressed simply, with an economy of ornament, rich material, and jewelry, but an accuracy of taste that was always dominant. Her plain gray merino dress, beautifully fitting her figure, suggested, with its pale blue facings, some uniform, as of the charitable society she patronized. She came towards him with a graceful movement of greeting, yet her face showed no consciousness of the interval that had elapsed since they met; he almost fancied himself transported back to the sitting-room at Sidon with the monotonous patter of the leaves outside, and the cool moist breath of the bay and alder coming in at the window.

"Father says that you are only passing through Tasajara to-day, as you did through

Sidon five years ago," she said with a smiling earnestness that he fancied however was the one new phase of her character. "But I won't believe it! At least we will not accept another visit quite as accidental as that, even though you brought us twice the good fortune you did then. You see, we have not forgotten it if you have, Mr. Grant. And unless you want us to believe that your fairy gifts will turn some day to leaves and ashes, you will promise to stay with us to-night, and let me show you some of the good we have done with them. Perhaps you don't know, or don't want to know, that it was *I* who got up this 'Library and Home Circle of the Sisters of Tasajara' which we are to open to-day. And can you imagine why? You remember — or have you forgotten — that you once affected to be concerned at the social condition of the young ladies on the plains of Sidon? Well, Mr. Grant, this is gotten up in order that the future Mr. Grants who wander may find future Miss Billingses who are worthy to converse with them and entertain them, and who no longer wear men's hats and live on the public road."

It was such a long speech for one so taciturn as he remembered Clementina to have

been ; so unexpected in tone considering her father's attitude towards him, and so unlooked for in its reference to a slight incident of the past, that Grant's critical contemplation of her gave way to a quiet and grateful glance of admiration. How could he have been so mistaken in her character ? He had always preferred the outspoken Euphemia, and yet why should he not have been equally mistaken in her ? Without having any personal knowledge of Rice's matrimonial troubles — for their intimate companionship had not continued after the survey — he had been inclined to blame him ; now he seemed to find excuses for him. He wondered if she really had liked him as Peters had hinted ; he wondered if she knew that he, Grant, was no longer intimate with him and knew nothing of her affairs. All this while he was accepting her proffered hospitality and sending to the hotel for his luggage. Then he drifted into a conversation, which he had expected would be brief, pointless, and confined to a stupid résumé of their mutual and social progress since they had left Sidon. But here he was again mistaken ; she was talking familiarly of present social topics, of things that she

knew clearly and well, without effort or attitude. She had been to New York and Boston for two winters ; she had spent the previous summer at Newport ; it might have been her whole youth for the fluency, accuracy, and familiarity of her detail, and the absence of provincial enthusiasm. She was going abroad, probably in the spring. She had thought of going to winter in Italy, but she would wait now until her sister was ready to go with her. Mr. Grant of course knew that Euphemia was separated from Mr. Rice — no ! — not until her father told him ? Well — the marriage had been a wild and foolish thing for both. But Euphemia was back again with them in the San Francisco house ; she had talked of coming to Tasa-jara to-day, perhaps she might be there to-night. And, good heavens ! it was actually three o'clock already, and they must start at once for the Hall. She would go and get her hat and return instantly.

It was true ; he had been talking with her an hour — pleasantly, intelligently, and yet with a consciousness of an indefinite satisfaction beyond all this. It must have been surprise at her transformation, or his previous misconception of her character. He

had been watching her features and wondering why he had ever thought them expressionless. There was also the pleasant suggestion — common to humanity in such instances — that he himself was in some way responsible for the change; that it was some awakened sympathy to his own nature that had breathed into this cold and faultless statue the warmth of life. In an odd flash of recollection he remembered how, five years ago, when Rice had suggested to her that she was “hard to please,” she had replied that she “did n’t know, but that she was waiting to see.” It did not occur to him to wonder why she had not awakened then, or if this awakening had anything to do with her own volition. It was not probable that they would meet again after to-day, or if they did, that she would not relapse into her former self and fail to impress him as she had now. But — here she was — a paragon of feminine promptitude — already standing in the doorway, accurately gloved and booted, and wearing a demure gray hat that modestly crowned her decorously elegant figure.

They crossed the plaza side by side, in the still garish sunlight that seemed to mock the scant shade of the youthful eucalyptus

trees, and presently fell in with the stream of people going in their direction. The former daughters of Sidon, the Billingses, the Peterses, and Wingates, were there bourgeoning and expanding in the glare of their new prosperity, with silk and gold; there were newer faces still, and pretty ones, — for Tasajara as a “Cow County” had attracted settlers with large families, — and there were already the contrasting types of East and West. Many turned to look after the tall figure of the daughter of the Founder of Tasajara, — a spectacle lately rare to the town; a few glanced at her companion, equally noticeable as a stranger. Thanks, however, to some judicious preliminary advertising from the hotel clerk, Peters, and Daniel Harcourt himself, by the time Grant and Miss Harcourt had reached the Hall his name and fame were already known, and speculation had already begun whether this new stroke of Harcourt’s shrewdness might not unite Clementina to a renowned and profitable partner.

The Hall was in one of the further and newly opened suburbs, and its side and rear windows gave immediately upon the outlying and illimitable plain of Tasajara. It

was a tasteful and fair-seeming structure of wood, surprisingly and surpassingly new. In fact that was its one dominant feature; nowhere else had youth and freshness ever shown itself as unconquerable and all-conquering. The spice of virgin woods and trackless forests still rose from its pine floors, and breathed from its outer shell of cedar that still oozed its sap, and redwood that still dropped its life-blood. Nowhere else were the plastered walls and ceilings as white and dazzling in their unstained purity, or as redolent of the outlying quarry in their clear cool breath of lime and stone. Even the turpentine of fresh and spotless paint added to this sense of wholesome germination, and as the clear and brilliant Californian sunshine swept through the open windows west and east, suffusing the whole palpitating structure with its searching and resistless radiance, the very air seemed filled with the aroma of creation.

The fresh colors of the young Republic, the bright blazonry of the newest State, the coat-of-arms of the infant County of Tasa-jara — (a vignette of sunset-*tules* cloven by the steam of an advancing train) — hanging from the walls, were all a part of this invin-

cible juvenescence. Even the newest silks, ribbons and prints of the latest holiday fashions made their first virgin appearance in the new building as if to consecrate it, until it was stirred by the rustle of youth, as with the sound and movement of budding spring.

A strain from the new organ — whose heart, however, had prematurely learned its own bitterness — and a thin, clear, but somewhat shrill chanting from a choir of young ladies were followed by a prayer from the Reverend Mr. Pilsbury. Then there was a pause of expectancy, and Grant's fair companion, who up to that moment had been quietly acting as guide and cicerone to her father's guest, excused herself with a little grimace of mock concern and was led away by one of the committee. Grant's usually keen eyes were wandering somewhat abstractedly over the agitated and rustling field of ribbons, flowers and feathers before him, past the blazonry of banner on the walls, and through the open windows to the long sunlit levels beyond, when he noticed a stir upon the raised dais or platform at the end of the room, where the notables of Tasajara were formally assembled. The mass of black coats suddenly parted and drew

back against the wall to allow the coming forward of a single graceful figure. A thrill of nervousness as unexpected as unaccountable passed over him as he recognized Clementina. In the midst of a sudden silence she read the report of the committee from a paper in her hand, in a clear, untroubled voice — the old voice of Sidon — and formally declared the building opened. The sunlight, nearly level, streamed through the western window across the front of the platform where she stood and transfigured her slight but noble figure. The hush that had fallen upon the Hall was as much the effect of that tranquil, ideal presence as of the message with which it was charged. And yet that apparition was as inconsistent with the clear, searching light which helped to set it off, as it was with the broad new blazonry of decoration, the yet unsullied record of the white walls, or even the frank, animated and pretty faces that looked upon it. Perhaps it was some such instinct that caused the applause which hesitatingly and tardily followed her from the platform to appear polite and half restrained rather than spontaneous.

Nevertheless Grant was honestly and sin-

cerely profuse in his congratulations. "You were far cooler and far more self-contained than *I* should have been in your place," he said, "than in fact I actually *was*, only as your auditor. But I suppose you have done it before?"

She turned her beautiful eyes on his wonderingly. "No,—this is the first time I ever appeared in public,—not even at school, for even there I was always a private pupil."

"You astonish me," said Grant; "you seemed like an old hand at it."

"Perhaps I did, or rather as if I did n't think anything of it myself,—and that no doubt is why the audience did n't think anything of it either."

So she *had* noticed her cold reception, and yet there was not the slightest trace of disappointment, regret, or wounded vanity in her tone or manner. "You must take me to the refreshment room now," she said pleasantly, "and help me to look after the young ladies who are my guests. I'm afraid there are still more speeches to come, and father and Mr. Pilsbury are looking as if they confidently expected something more would be 'expected' of them."

Grant at once threw himself into the task assigned to him, with his natural gallantry and a certain captivating playfulness which he still retained. Perhaps he was the more anxious to please in order that his companion might share some of his popularity, for it was undeniable that Miss Harcourt still seemed to excite only a constrained politeness among those with whom she courteously mingled. And this was still more distinctly marked by the contrast of a later incident.

For some moments the sound of laughter and greeting had risen near the door of the refreshment room that opened upon the central hall, and there was a perceptible movement of the crowd — particularly of youthful male Tasajara — in that direction. It was evident that it announced the unexpected arrival of some popular resident. Attracted like the others, Grant turned and saw the company making way for the smiling, easy, half-saucy, half-complacent entry of a handsomely dressed young girl. As she turned from time to time to recognize with rallying familiarity or charming impertinence some of her admirers, there was that in her tone and gesture which instantly recalled to him the past. It was unmistakably Euphemia!

His eyes instinctively sought Clementina's. She was gazing at him with such a grave, penetrating look, — half doubting, half wistful, — a look so unlike her usual unruffled calm that he felt strangely stirred. But the next moment, when she rejoined him, the look had entirely gone. "You have not seen my sister since you were at Sidon, I believe?" she said quietly. "She would be sorry to miss you." But Euphemia and her train were already passing them on the opposite side of the long table. She had evidently recognized Grant, yet the two sisters were looking intently into each other's eyes when he raised his own. Then Euphemia met his bow with a momentary accession of color, a coquettish wave of her hand across the table, a slight exaggeration of her usual fascinating recklessness, and smilingly moved away. He turned to Clementina, but here an ominous tapping at the farther end of the long table revealed the fact that Mr. Harcourt was standing on a chair with oratorical possibilities in his face and attitude. There was another forward movement in the crowd and — silence. In that solid, black-broadclothed, respectable figure, that massive watchchain, that white

waistcoat, that diamond pin glistening in the satin cravat, Euphemia might have seen the realization of her prophetic vision at Sidon five years before.

He spoke for ten minutes with a fluency and comprehensive business-like directness that surprised Grant. He was not there, he said, to glorify what had been done by himself, his family, or his friends in Tasajara. Others who were to follow him might do that, or at least might be better able to explain and expatiate upon the advantages of the institution they had just opened, and its social, moral, and religious effect upon the community. He was there as a business man to demonstrate to them — as he had always done and always hoped to do — the money value of improvement; the profit — if they might choose to call it — of well-regulated and properly calculated speculation. The plot of land upon which they stood, of which the building occupied only one eighth, was bought two years before for ten thousand dollars. When the plans of the building were completed a month afterwards, the value of the remaining seven eighths had risen enough to defray the cost of the entire construction. He was in a position to tell

them that only that morning the adjacent property, subdivided and laid out in streets and building-plots, had been admitted into the corporate limits of the city; and that on the next anniversary of the building they would approach it through an avenue of finished dwellings! An outburst of applause followed the speaker's practical climax; the fresh young faces of his auditors glowed with invincible enthusiasm; the afternoon trade-winds, freshening over the limitless plain beyond, tossed the bright banners at the windows as with sympathetic rejoicing, and a few odorous pine shavings, overlooked in a corner in the hurry of preparation, touched by an eddying zephyr, crept out and rolled in yellow ringlets across the floor.

The Reverend Doctor Pilsbury arose in a more decorous silence. He had listened approvingly, admiringly, he might say even reverently, to the preceding speaker. But although his distinguished friend had, with his usual modesty, made light of his own services and those of his charming family, he, the speaker, had not risen to sing his praises. No; it was not in this Hall, projected by his foresight and raised by his

liberality; in this town, called into existence by his energy and stamped by his attributes; in this county, developed by his genius and sustained by his capital; ay, in this very State whose grandeur was made possible by such giants as he, — it was not in any of these places that it was necessary to praise Daniel Harcourt, or that a panegyric of him would be more than idle repetition. Nor would he, as that distinguished man had suggested, enlarge upon the social, moral, and religious benefits of the improvement they were now celebrating. It was written on the happy, innocent faces, in the festive garb, in the decorous demeanor, in the intelligent eyes that sparkled around him, in the presence of those of his parishioners whom he could meet as freely here to-day as in his own church on Sunday. What then could he say? What then was there to say? Perhaps he should say nothing if it were not for the presence of the young before him. — He stopped and fixed his eyes paternally on the youthful Johnny Billings, who with a half dozen other Sunday-school scholars had been marshaled before the reverend speaker. — And what was to be the lesson *they* were to learn from it? They

had heard what had been achieved by labor, enterprise, and diligence. Perhaps they would believe, and naturally too, that what labor, enterprise, and diligence had done could be done again. But was that all? Was there nothing behind these qualities — which, after all, were within the reach of every one here? Had they ever thought that back of every pioneer, every explorer, every pathfinder, every founder and creator, there was still another? There was no *terra incognita* so rare as to be unknown to one; no wilderness so remote as to be beyond a greater ken than theirs; no waste so trackless but that one had already passed that way! Did they ever reflect that when the dull sea ebbed and flowed in the *tules* over the very spot where they were now standing, who it was that also foresaw, conceived, and ordained the mighty change that would take place; who even guided and directed the feeble means employed to work it; whose spirit moved, as in still older days of which they had read, over the face of the stagnant waters? Perhaps they had. Who then was the real pioneer of Tasajara, — back of the Harcourts, the Peterses, the Billingses, and Wingates? The reverend gen-

tleman gently paused for a reply. It was given in the clear but startled accents of the half frightened, half-fascinated Johnny Billings, in three words:—

“’Lige Curtis, sir!”

CHAPTER VI.

THE trade wind, that, blowing directly from the Golden Gate, seemed to concentrate its full force upon the western slope of Russian Hill, might have dismayed any climber less hopeful and sanguine than that most imaginative of newspaper reporters and most youthful of husbands, John Milton Harcourt. But for all that it was an honest wind, and its dry, practical energy and salt-pervading breath only seemed to sting him to greater and more enthusiastic exertions, until, quite at the summit of the hill and last of a straggling line of little cottages half submerged in drifting sand, he stood upon his own humble porch.

"I was thinking, coming up the hill, Loo," he said, bursting into the sitting-room, pantingly, "of writing something about the future of the hill! How it will look fifty years from now, all terraced with houses and gardens!—and right up here a kind of Acropolis, don't you know. I

had quite a picture of it in my mind just now."

A plainly-dressed young woman with a pretty face, that, however, looked as if it had been prematurely sapped of color and vitality, here laid aside some white sewing she had in her lap, and said : —

"But you did that once before, Milty, and you know the "Herald" would n't take it because they said it was a free notice of Mr. Boorem's building lots, and he did n't advertise in the "Herald." I always told you that you ought to have seen Boorem first."

The young fellow blinked his eyes with a momentary arrest of that buoyant hopefulness which was their peculiar characteristic, but nevertheless replied with undaunted cheerfulness, "I forgot. Anyhow, it's all the same, for I worked it into that 'Sunday Walk.' And it's just as easy to write it the other way, you see, — looking back, *down the hill*, you know. Something about the old Padres toiling through the sand just before the Angelus ; or as far back as Sir Francis Drake's time, and have a runaway boat's crew, coming ashore to look for gold that the Mexicans had talked of. Lord ! that's easy enough ! I tell you what, Loo,

it 's worth living up here just for the inspiration." Even while boyishly exhaling this enthusiasm he was also divesting himself of certain bundles whose contents seemed to imply that he had brought his dinner with him,—the youthful Mrs. Harcourt setting the table in a perfunctory, listless way that contrasted oddly with her husband's cheerful energy.

"You have n't heard of any regular situation yet?" she asked abstractedly.

"No, — not exactly," he replied. "But [buoyantly] it's a great deal better for me not to take anything in a hurry and tie myself to any particular line. Now, I'm quite free."

"And I suppose you have n't seen that Mr. Fletcher again?" she continued.

"No. He only wanted to know something about me. That's the way with them all, Loo. Whenever I apply for work anywhere it's always: 'So you're Dan'l Harcourt's son, eh? Quarreled with the old man? Bad job; better make it up! You'll make more stickin' to him. He's worth millions!' Everybody seems to think everything of *him*, as if *I* had no individuality beyond that. I've a good mind to change my name."

“And pray what would mine be then?”

There was so much irritation in her voice that he drew nearer her and gently put his arm around her waist. “Why, whatever mine was, darling,” he said with a tender smile. “You did n’t fall in love with any particular name, did you, Loo?”

“No, but I married a particular one,” she said quickly.

His eyelids quivered again, as if he was avoiding some unpleasantly staring suggestion, and she stopped.

“You know what I mean, dear,” she said, with a quick little laugh. “Just because your father’s an old crosspatch, *you* have n’t lost your rights to his name and property. And those people who say you ought to make it up perhaps know what’s for the best.”

“But you remember what he said of you, Loo?” said the young man with a flashing eye. “Do you think I can ever forget that?”

“But you *do* forget it, dear; you forget it when you go in town among fresh faces and people; when you are looking for work. You forget it when you’re at work writing your copy, — for I’ve seen you smile as you

wrote. You forget it climbing up the dreadful sand, for you were thinking just now of what happened years ago, or is to happen years to come. And I want to forget it too, Milty. I don't want to sit here all day, thinking of it, with the wind driving the sand against the window, and nothing to look at but those white tombs in Lone Mountain Cemetery, and those white caps that might be gravestones too, and not a soul to talk to or even see pass by until I feel as if I were dead and buried also. If you were me — you — you — you — could n't help crying too!"

Indeed he was very near it now. For as he caught her in his arms, suddenly seeing with a lover's sympathy and the poet's swifter imagination all that she had seen and even more, he was aghast at the vision conjured. In her delicate health and loneliness how dreadful must have been these monotonous days, and this glittering, cruel sea! What a selfish brute he was! Yet as he stood there holding her, silently and rhythmically marking his tenderness and remorseful feelings by rocking her from side to side like a languid metronome, she quietly disengaged her wet lashes from his shoulder and said in quite another tone: —

"So they were all at Tasajara last week?"

"Who, dear?"

"Your father and sisters."

"Yes," said John Milton, hesitatingly.

"And they've taken back your sister after her divorce?"

The staring obtrusiveness of this fact apparently made her husband's bright sympathetic eye blink as before.

"And if you were to divorce me, *you* would be taken back too," she added quickly, suddenly withdrawing herself with a pettish movement and walking to the window.

But he followed. "Don't talk in that way, Loo! Don't look in that way, dear!" he said, taking her hand gently, yet not without a sense of some inconsistency in her conduct that jarred upon his own simple directness. "You know that nothing can part us now. I was wrong to let my little girl worry herself all alone here, but I—I—thought it was all so—so bright and free out on this hill,—looking far away beyond the Golden Gate,—as far as Cathay, you know, and such a change from those dismal flats of Tasajara and that awful stretch of *tules*. But it's all right now. And now that I know how you feel, we'll go elsewhere."

She did not reply. Perhaps she found it difficult to keep up her injured attitude in the face of her husband's gentleness. Perhaps her attention had been attracted by the unusual spectacle of a stranger, who had just mounted the hill and was now slowly passing along the line of cottages with a hesitating air of inquiry. "He may be looking for this house, — for you," she said in an entirely new tone of interest. "Run out and see. It may be some one who wants" —

"An article," said Milton cheerfully. "By Jove! he *is* coming here."

The stranger was indeed approaching the little cottage, and with apparently some confidence. He was a well-dressed, well-made man, whose age looked uncertain from the contrast between his heavy brown moustache and his hair, that, curling under the brim of his hat, was almost white in color. The young man started, and said, hurriedly: "I really believe it is Fletcher, — they say his hair turned white from the Panama fever."

It was indeed Mr. Fletcher who entered and introduced himself, — a gentle reserved man, with something of that colorlessness of

premature age in his speech which was observable in his hair. He had heard of Mr. Harcourt from a friend who had recommended him highly. As Mr. Harcourt had probably been told, he, the speaker, was about to embark some capital in a first-class newspaper in San Francisco, and should select the staff himself. He wanted to secure only first-rate talent, — but above all, youthfulness, directness, and originality. The “Clarion,” for that was to be its name, was to have nothing “old foggy” about it. No. It was distinctly to be the organ of Young California! This and much more from the grave lips of the elderly young man, whose speech seemed to be divided between the pretty, but equally faded, young wife, and the one personification of invincible youth present, — her husband.

“But I fear I have interrupted your household duties,” he said pleasantly. “You were preparing dinner. Pray go on. And let me help you, — I ’m not a bad cook, — and you can give me my reward by letting me share it with you, for the climb up here has sharpened my appetite. We can talk as we go on.”

It was in vain to protest; there was some-

thing paternal as well as practical in the *camaraderie* of this actual capitalist and possible Mæcenæ and patron as he quietly hung up his hat and overcoat, and helped to set the table with a practiced hand. Nor, as he suggested, did the conversation falter, and before they had taken their seats at the frugal board he had already engaged John Milton Harcourt as assistant editor of the "Clarion" at a salary that seemed princely to this son of a millionaire! The young wife meantime had taken active part in the discussion; whether it was vaguely understood that the possession of poetical and imaginative faculties precluded any capacity for business, or whether it was owing to the apparent superior maturity of Mrs. Harcourt and the stranger, it was certain that *they* arranged the practical details of the engagement, and that the youthful husband sat silent, merely offering his always hopeful and sanguine consent.

"You'll take a house nearer to town, I suppose?" continued Mr. Fletcher to the lady, "though you've a charming view here. I suppose it was quite a change from Tasajara and your father-in-law's house? I daresay he had as fine a place there — on his own homestead — as he has here?"

Young Harcourt dropped his sensitive eyelids again. It seemed hard that he could never get away from these allusions to his father! Perhaps it was only to that relationship that he was indebted for his visitor's kindness. In his simple honesty he could not bear the thought of such a misapprehension. "Perhaps, Mr. Fletcher, you do not know," he said, "that my father is not on terms with me, and that we neither expect anything nor could we ever take anything from him. Could we, Loo?" He added the useless question partly because he saw that his wife's face betrayed little sympathy with him, and partly that Fletcher was looking at her curiously, as if for confirmation. But this was another of John Milton's trials as an imaginative reporter; nobody ever seemed to care for his practical opinions or facts!

"Mr. Fletcher is not interested in our little family differences, Milty," she said, looking at Mr. Fletcher, however, instead of him. "You're Daniel Harcourt's *son* what ever happens."

The cloud that had passed over the young man's face and eyes did not, however, escape Mr. Fletcher's attention, for he smiled,

and added gayly, "And I hope my valued lieutenant in any case." Nevertheless John Milton was quite ready to avail himself of an inspiration to fetch some cigars for his guest from the bar of the Sea-View House on the slope of the hill beyond, and thereby avoid a fateful subject. Once in the fresh air again he promptly recovered his boyish spirits. The light flying scud had already effaced the first rising stars ; the lower creeping sea-fog had already blotted out the western shore and sea ; but below him to the east the glittering lights of the city seemed to start up with a new, mysterious, and dazzling brilliancy. It was the valley of diamonds that Sindbad saw lying almost at his feet ! Perhaps somewhere there the light of his own fame and fortune was already beginning to twinkle !

He returned to his humble roof joyous and inspired. As he entered the hall he heard his wife's voice and his own name mentioned, followed by that awkward, meaningless silence on his entrance which so plainly indicated either that he had been the subject of conversation or that it was not for his ears. It was a dismal reminder of his boyhood at Sidon and Tasajara. But he was too full of hope and ambition to heed it to-night, and

later, when Mr. Fletcher had taken his departure, his pent-up enthusiasm burst out before his youthful partner. Had she realized that their struggles were over now, that their future was secure? They need no longer fear ever being forced to take bounty from the family; they were independent of them all! He would make a name for himself that should be distinct from his father's as he should make a fortune that would be theirs alone. The young wife smiled. "But all that need not prevent you, dear, from claiming your *rights* when the time comes."

"But if I scorn to make the claim or take a penny of his, Loo?"

"You say you scorn to take the money you think your father got by a mere trick, — at the best, — and did n't earn. And now you will be able to show you can live without it, and earn your own fortune. Well, dear, for that very reason why should you let your father and others enjoy and waste what is fairly your share? For it is *your* share whether it came to your father fairly or not; and if not, it is still your duty, believing as you do, to claim it from him, that at least *you* may do with it what you choose. You might want to restore it — to — to — somebody."

The young man laughed. "But, my dear Loo! suppose that I were weak enough to claim it, do you think my father would give it up? He has the right, and no law could force him to yield to me more than he chooses."

"Not the law, — but *you* could."

"I don't understand you," he said quickly.

"You could force him by simply telling him what you once told me."

John Milton drew back, and his hand dropped loosely from his wife's. The color left his fresh young face; the light quivered for a moment and then became fixed and set in his eyes. For that moment he looked ten years her senior. "I was wrong ever to tell even you that, Loo," he said in a low voice. "You are wrong to ever remind me of it. Forget it from this moment, as you value our love and want it to live and be remembered. And forget, Loo, as I do, — and ever shall, — that you ever suggested to me to use my secret in the way you did just now."

But here Mrs. Harcourt burst into tears, more touched by the alteration in her husband's manner, I fear, than by any contrition for wrongdoing. Of course if he wished to withdraw his confidences from her, just

as he had almost confessed he wished to withdraw his *name*, she could n't help it, but it was hard that when she sat there all day long trying to think what was best for them, she should be blamed ! At which the quiet and forgiving John Milton smiled remorsefully and tried to comfort her. Nevertheless an occasional odd, indefinable chill seemed to creep across the feverish enthusiasm with which he was celebrating this day of fortune. And yet he neither knew nor suspected until long after that his foolish wife had that night half betrayed his secret to the stranger !

The next day he presented a note of introduction from Mr. Fletcher to the business manager of the "Clarion," and the following morning was duly installed in office. He did not see his benefactor again ; that single visit was left in the mystery and isolation of an angelic episode. It later appeared that other and larger interests in the San José valley claimed his patron's residence and attendance ; only the capital and general purpose of the paper — to develop into a party organ in the interest of his possible senatorial aspirations in due season — was furnished by him. Grateful as John

Milton felt towards him, he was relieved ; it seemed probable that Mr. Fletcher *had* selected him on his individual merits, and not as the son of a millionaire.

He threw himself into his work with his old hopeful enthusiasm, and perhaps an originality of method that was part of his singular independence. Without the student's training or restraint, — for his two years' schooling at Tasajara during his parents' prosperity came too late to act as a discipline, — he was unfettered by any rules, and guided only by an unerring instinctive taste that became near being genius. He was a brilliant and original, if not always a profound and accurate, reporter. By degrees he became an accustomed interest to the readers of the "Clarion ;" then an influence. Actors themselves in many a fierce drama, living lives of devotion, emotion, and picturesque incident, they had satisfied themselves with only the briefest and most practical daily record of their adventure, and even at first were dazed and startled to find that many of them had been heroes and some poets. The stealthy boyish reader of romantic chronicle at Sidon had learned by heart the chivalrous story of the emigration.

The second column of the "Clarion" became famous even while the figure of its youthful writer, unknown and unrecognized, was still nightly climbing the sands of Russian Hill, and even looking down as before on the lights of the growing city, without a thought that he had added to that glittering constellation.

Cheerful and contented with the exercise of work, he would have been happy but for the gradual haunting of another dread which presently began to drag him at earlier hours up the steep path to his little home ; to halt him before the door with the quickened breath of an anxiety he would scarcely confess to himself, and sometimes hold him aimlessly a whole day beneath his roof. For the pretty but delicate Mrs. Harcourt, like others of her class, had added a weak and ineffective maternity to their other conjugal trials, and one early dawn a baby was born that lingered with them scarcely longer than the morning mist and exhaled with the rising sun. The young wife regained her strength slowly, — so slowly that the youthful husband brought his work at times to the house to keep her company. And a singular change had come over her.

She no longer talked of the past, nor of his family. As if the little life that had passed with that morning mist had represented some ascending expiatory sacrifice, it seemed to have brought them into closer communion.

Yet her weak condition made him conceal another trouble that had come upon him. It was in the third month of his employment on the "Clarion" that one afternoon, while correcting some proofs on his chief's desk, he came upon the following editorial paragraph: —

"The played-out cant of 'pioneer genius' and 'pioneer discovery' appears to have reached its climax in the attempt of some of our contemporaries to apply it to Dan Harcourt's new Tasajara Job before the legislature. It is perfectly well known in Harcourt's own district that, far from being a pioneer and settler *himself*, he simply succeeded after a fashion to the genuine work of one Elijah Curtis, an actual pioneer and discoverer, years before, while Harcourt, we believe, was keeping a frontier doggerly in Sidon, and dispensing 'tanglefoot' and salt junk to the hayfooted Pike Countians of his precinct. This would make him as much of

the 'pioneer discoverer' as the rattlesnake who first takes up board and lodgings and then possession in a prairie dog's burrow. And if the traveler's tale is true that the rattlesnake sometimes makes a meal of his landlord, the story told at Sidon may be equally credible that the original pioneer mysteriously disappeared about the time that Dan Harcourt came into the property. From which it would seem that Harcourt is not in a position for his friends to invite very deep scrutiny into his 'pioneer' achievements."

Stupefaction, a vague terror, and rising anger, rapidly succeeded each other in the young man's mind as he stood mechanically holding the paper in his hand. It was the writing of his chief editor, whose easy brutality he had sometimes even boyishly admired. Without stopping to consider their relative positions he sought him indignantly and laid the proof before him. The editor laughed. "But what's that to *you*? *You*'re not on terms with the old man."

"But he is my father!" said John Milton hotly.

"Look here," said the editor good-naturedly, "I'd like to oblige you, but it is n't

business, you know, — and this *is*, you understand, — *proprietor's business* too! Of course I see it might stand in the way of your making up to the old man afterwards and coming in for a million. Well! you can tell him it's *me*. Say I *would* put it in. Say I'm nasty — and I *am*!”

“Then it must go in?” said John Milton with a white face.

“You bet.”

“Then *I* must go out!” And writing out his resignation, he laid it before his chief and left.

But he could not bear to tell this to his wife when he climbed the hill that night, and he invented some excuse for bringing his work home. The invalid never noticed any change in his usual buoyancy, and indeed I fear, when he was fairly installed with his writing materials at the foot of her bed, he had quite forgotten the episode. He was recalled to it by a faint sigh.

“What is it, dear?” he said looking up.

“I like to see you writing, Milt. You always look so happy.”

“Always so happy, dear?”

“Yes. You are happy, are you not?”

“Always.” He got up and kissed her.

Nevertheless, when he sat down to his work again, his face was turned a little more to the window.

Another serious incident — to be also kept from the invalid — shortly followed. The article in the “Clarion” had borne its fruit. The third day after his resignation a rival paper sharply retorted. “The cowardly insinuations against the record of a justly honored capitalist,” said the “Pioneer,” “although quite in keeping with the brazen ‘Clarion,’ might attract the attentions of the slandered party, if it were not known to his friends as well as himself that it may be traced almost directly to a cast-off member of his own family, who, it seems, is reduced to haunting the back doors of certain blatant journals to dispose of his cheap wares. The slanderer is secure from public exposure in the superior decency of his relations, who refrain from airing their family linen upon editorial lines.”

This was the journal to which John Milton had hopefully turned for work. When he read it there seemed but one thing for him to do — and he did it. Gentle and optimistic as was his nature, he had been brought up in a community where sincere directness

of personal offense was followed by equally sincere directness of personal redress, and — he challenged the editor. The bearer of his cartel was one Jack Hamlin, I grieve to say a gambler by profession, but between whom and John Milton had sprung up an odd friendship of which the best that can be said is that it was to each equally and unselfishly unprofitable. The challenge was accepted, the preliminaries arranged. “I suppose,” said Jack carelessly, “as the old man ought to do something for your wife in case of accident, you’ve made some sort of a will?”

“I’ve thought of that,” said John Milton, dubiously, “but I’m afraid it’s no use. You see” — he hesitated — “I’m not of age.”

“May I ask how old you are, sonny?” said Jack with great gravity.

“I’m almost twenty,” said John Milton, coloring.

“It is n’t exactly *vingt-et-un*, but I’d stand on it; if I were you I would n’t draw to such a hand,” said Jack, coolly.

The young husband had arranged to be absent from his home that night, and early morning found him, with Jack, grave, but

courageous, in a little hollow behind the Mission Hills. To them presently approached his antagonist, jauntily accompanied by Colonel Starbottle, his second. They halted, but after the formal salutation were instantly joined by Jack Hamlin. For a few moments John Milton remained awkwardly alone — pending a conversation which even at that supreme moment he felt as being like the general attitude of his friends towards him, in its complete ignoring of himself. The next moment the three men stepped towards him. “We have come, sir,” said Colonel Starbottle in his precisest speech but his jauntiest manner, “to offer you a full and ample apology — a personal apology — which only supplements that full public apology that my principal, sir, this gentleman,” indicating the editor of the “Pioneer,” “has this morning made in the columns of his paper, as you will observe,” producing a newspaper. “We have, sir,” continued the colonel loftily, “only within the last twelve hours become aware of the — er — *real* circumstances of the case. We would regret that the affair had gone so far already, if it had not given us, sir, the opportunity of testifying to your gallantry. We

do so gladly ; and if — er — er — a *few years later*, Mr. Harcourt, you should ever need — a friend in any matter of this kind, I am, sir, at your service.” John Milton gazed half inquiringly, half uneasily at Jack.

“It’s all right, Milt,” he said *sotto voce*. “Shake hands all round and let’s go to breakfast. And I rather think that editor wants to employ you *himself*.”

It was true, for when that night he climbed eagerly the steep homeward hill he carried with him the written offer of an engagement on the “Pioneer.” As he entered the door his wife’s nurse and companion met him with a serious face. There had been a strange and unexpected change in the patient’s condition, and the doctor had already been there twice. As he put aside his coat and hat and entered her room, it seemed to him that he had forever put aside all else of essay and ambition beyond those four walls. And with the thought a great peace came upon him. It seemed good to him to live for her alone.

It was not for long. As each monotonous day brought the morning mist and evening fog regularly to the little hilltop where his whole being was now centred, she seemed

to grow daily weaker, and the little circle of her life narrowed day by day. One morning when the usual mist appeared to have been withheld and the sun had risen with a strange and cruel brightness; when the waves danced and sparkled on the bay below and light glanced from dazzling sails, and even the white tombs on Lone Mountain glittered keenly; when cheery voices hailing each other on the hillside came to him clearly but without sense or meaning; when earth, sky, and sea seemed quivering with life and motion,—he opened the door of that one little house on which the only shadow seemed to have fallen, and went forth again into the world alone.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. DANIEL HARCOURT'S town mansion was also on an eminence, but it was that gentler acclivity of fashion known as Rincon Hill, and sunned itself on a southern slope of luxury. It had been described as "princely" and "fairy-like," by a grateful reporter; tourists and travelers had sung its praises in letters to their friends and in private reminiscences, for it had dispensed hospitality to most of the celebrities who had visited the coast. Nevertheless its charm was mainly due to the ruling taste of Miss Clementina Harcourt, who had astonished her father by her marvelous intuition of the nice requirements and elegant responsibilities of their position; and had thrown her mother into the pained perplexity of a matronly hen, who, among the ducks' eggs intrusted to her fostering care, had unwittingly hatched a graceful but discomposing cygnet.

Indeed, after holding out feebly against the siege of wealth at Tasajara and San

Francisco, Mrs. Harcourt had abandoned herself hopelessly to the horrors of its invasion ; had allowed herself to be dragged from her kitchen by her exultant daughters and set up in black silk in a certain conventional respectability in the drawing-room. Strange to say, her commiserating hospitality, or hospital-like ministration, not only gave her popularity, but a certain kind of distinction. An exaltation so sorrowfully deprecated by its possessor was felt to be a sign of superiority. She was spoken of as "motherly," even by those who vaguely knew that there was somewhere a discarded son struggling in poverty with a helpless wife, and that she had sided with her husband in disinheriting a daughter who had married unwisely. She was sentimentally spoken of as a "true wife," while never opposing a single meanness of her husband, suggesting a single active virtue, nor questioning her right to sacrifice herself and her family for his sake. With nothing she cared to affect, she was quite free from affectation, and even the critical Lawrence Grant was struck with the dignity which her narrow simplicity, that had seemed small even in Sidon, attained in her palatial hall in San Francisco. It ap-

peared to be a perfectly logical conclusion that when such unaffectedness and simplicity were forced to assume a hostile attitude to anybody, the latter must be to blame.

Since the festival of Tasajara Mr. Grant had been a frequent visitor at Harcourt's, and was a guest on the eve of his departure from San Francisco. The distinguished position of each made their relations appear quite natural without inciting gossip as to any attraction in Harcourt's daughters. It was late one afternoon as he was passing the door of Harcourt's study that his host called him in. He found him sitting at his desk with some papers before him and a folded copy of the "*Clarion*." With his back to the fading light of the window his face was partly in shadow.

"By the way, Grant," he began, with an assumption of carelessness somewhat inconsistent with the fact that he had just called him in, "it may be necessary for me to pull up those fellows who are blackguarding me in the "*Clarion*."

"Why, they have n't been saying anything new?" asked Grant, laughingly, as he glanced towards the paper.

"No — that is — only a rehash of what

they said before," returned Harcourt without opening the paper.

"Well," said Grant playfully, "you don't mind their saying that you're *not* the original pioneer of Tasajara, for it's true; nor that that fellow 'Lige Curtis disappeared suddenly, for he did, if I remember rightly. But there's nothing in that to invalidate your rights to Tasajara, to say nothing of your five years' undisputed possession."

"Of course there's no *legal* question," said Harcourt almost sharply. "But as a matter of absurd report, I may want to contradict their insinuations. And *you* remember all the circumstances, don't you?"

"I should think so! Why, my dear fellow, I've told it everywhere! — here, in New York, Newport, and in London; by Jove, it's one of my best stories! How a company sent me out with a surveyor to look up a railroad and agricultural possibilities in the wilderness; how just as I found them — and a rather big thing they made, too — I was set afloat by a flood and a raft, and drifted ashore on your bank, and practically demonstrated to you what you did n't know and did n't dare to hope for — that there could be a waterway straight to Sidon

from the *embarcadero*. I've told what a charming evening we had with you and your daughters in the old house, and how I returned your hospitality by giving you a tip about the railroad; and how you slipped out while we were playing cards, to clinch the bargain for the land with that drunken fellow, 'Lige Curtis' —

"What's that?" interrupted Harcourt, quickly.

It was well that the shadow hid from Grant the expression of Harcourt's face, or his reply might have been sharper. As it was, he answered a little stiffly: —

"I beg your pardon" —

Harcourt recovered himself. "You're all wrong!" he said, "that bargain was made long *before*; I never saw 'Lige Curtis after you came to the house. It was before that, in the afternoon," he went on hurriedly, "that he was last in my store. I can prove it." Nevertheless he was so shocked and indignant at being confronted in his own suppressions and falsehoods by an even greater and more astounding misconception of fact, that for a moment he felt helpless. What, he reflected, if it were alleged that 'Lige had returned again after

the loafers had gone, or had never left the store as had been said? Nonsense! There was John Milton, who had been there reading all the time, and who could disprove it. Yes, but John Milton was his discarded son, — his enemy, — perhaps even his very slanderer!

“But,” said Grant quietly, “don’t you remember that your daughter Euphemia said something that evening about the land Lige had *offered* you, and you snapped up the young lady rather sharply for letting out secrets, and *then* you went out? At least that’s my impression.”

It was, however, more than an impression; with Grant’s scientific memory for characteristic details he had noticed that particular circumstance as part of the social phenomena.

“I don’t know what Phemie *said*,” returned Harcourt, impatiently. “I *know* there was no offer pending; the land had been sold to me before I ever saw you. Why — you must have thought me up to pretty sharp practice with Curtis — eh?” he added, with a forced laugh.

Grant smiled; he had been accustomed to hear of such sharp practice among his busi-

ness acquaintance, although he himself by nature and profession was incapable of it, but he had not deemed Harcourt more scrupulous than others. "Perhaps so," he said lightly, "but for Heaven's sake don't ask me to spoil my reputation as a *raconteur* for the sake of a mere fact or two. I assure you it's a mighty taking story as *I* tell it — and it don't hurt you in a business way. You're the hero of it — hang it all!"

"Yes," said Harcourt, without noticing Grant's half cynical superiority, but you'll oblige me if you won't tell it again *in that way*. There are men here mean enough to make the worst of it. It's nothing to me, of course, but my family — the girls, you know — are rather sensitive."

"I had no idea they even knew it, — much less cared for it," said Grant, with sudden seriousness. "I dare say if those fellows in the "*Clarion*" knew that they were annoying the ladies they'd drop it. Who's the editor? Look here — leave it to me; I'll look into it. Better that you should n't appear in the matter at all."

"You understand that if it was a really serious matter, Grant," said Harcourt with a slight attitude, "I should n't allow any one to take my place."

“My dear fellow, there ’ll be nobody ‘called out’ and no ‘shooting at sight,’ whatever is the result of my interference,” returned Grant, lightly. “It ’ll be all right.” He was quite aware of the power of his own independent position and the fact that he had been often appealed to before in delicate arbitration.

Harcourt was equally conscious of this, but by a strange inconsistency now felt relieved at the coolness with which Grant had accepted the misconception which had at first seemed so dangerous. If he were ready to condone what he thought was *sharp practice*, he could not be less lenient with the real facts that might come out, — of course always excepting that interpolated consideration in the bill of sale, which, however, no one but the missing Curtis could ever discover. The fact that a man of Grant’s secure position had interested himself in this matter would secure him from the working of that personal vulgar jealousy which his humbler antecedents had provoked. And if, as he fancied, Grant really cared for Clementina —

“As you like,” he said, with half-affected lightness, “and now let us talk of some-

thing else. Clementina has been thinking of getting up a riding party to San Mateo for Mrs. Ashwood. We must show them some civility, and that Boston brother of hers, Mr. Shipley, will have to be invited also. I can't get away, and my wife, of course, will only be able to join them at San Mateo in the carriage. I reckon it would be easier for Clementina if you took my place, and helped her look after the riding party. It will need a man, and I think she'd prefer you — as you know she's rather particular — unless, of course, you'd be wanted for Mrs. Ashwood or Phemie, or somebody else."

From his shadowed corner he could see that a pleasant light had sprung into Grant's eyes, although his reply was in his ordinary easy banter. "I shall be only too glad to act as Miss Clementina's *vaquero*, and lasso her runaways, or keep stragglers in the road."

There seemed to be small necessity, however, for this active coöperation, for when the cheerful cavalcade started from the house a few mornings later, Mr. Lawrence Grant's onerous duties seemed to be simply confined to those of an ordinary cavalier at the side

of Miss Clementina, a few paces in the rear of the party. But this safe distance gave them the opportunity of conversing without being overheard, — an apparently discreet precaution.

“Your father was so exceedingly affable to me the other day that if I had n’t given you my promise to say nothing, I think I would have fallen on my knees to him then and there, revealed my feelings, asked for your hand and his blessing — or whatever one does at such a time. But how long do you intend to keep me in this suspense?”

Clementina turned her clear eyes half abstractedly upon him, as if imperfectly recalling some forgotten situation. “You forget,” she said, “that part of your promise was that you would n’t even speak of it to me again without my permission.”

“But my time is so short now. Give me some definite hope before I go. Let me believe that when we meet in New York” —

“You will find me just the same as now! Yes, I think I can promise *that*. Let that suffice. You said the other day you liked me because I had not changed for five years. You can surely trust that I will not alter in as many months.”

“If I only knew” —

“Ah, if *I* only knew, — if *we all* only knew. But we don’t. Come, Mr. Grant, let it rest as it is. Unless you want to go still further back and have it as it *was*, at Sidon. There I think you fancied Euphemia most.”

“Clementina!”

“That is my name, and those people ahead of us know it already.”

“You are called *Clementina*, — but you are not merciful!”

“You are very wrong, for you might see that Mr. Shipley has twice checked his horse that he might hear what you are saying, and Phemie is always showing Mrs. Ashwood something in the landscape behind us.”

All this was the more hopeless and exasperating to Grant since in the young girl’s speech and manner there was not the slightest trace of coquetry or playfulness. He could not help saying a little bitterly: “I don’t think that any one would imagine from your manner that you were receiving a declaration.”

“But they might imagine from yours that you had the right to quarrel with me, — which would be worse.”

“We cannot part like this! It is too cruel to me.”

"We cannot part otherwise without the risk of greater cruelty."

"But say at least, Clementina, that I have no rival. There is no other more favored suitor?"

"That is so like a man — and yet so unlike the proud one I believed you to be. Why should a man like you even consider such a possibility? If I were a man I know *I* could n't." She turned upon him a glance so clear and untroubled by either conscious vanity or evasion that he was hopelessly convinced of the truth of her statement, and she went on in a slightly lowered tone, "You have no right to ask me such a question, — but perhaps for that reason I am willing to answer you. There is none. Hush! For a good rider you are setting a poor example to the others, by crowding me towards the bank. Go forward and talk to Phemie, and tell her not to worry Mrs. Ashwood's horse nor race with her; I don't think he's quite safe, and Mrs. Ashwood is n't accustomed to using the Spanish bit. I suppose I must say something to Mr. Shipley, who does n't seem to understand that *I*'m acting as chaperon, and *you* as captain of the party."

She cantered forward as she spoke, and

Grant was obliged to join her sister, who, mounted on a powerful roan, was mischievously exciting a beautiful quaker-colored mustang ridden by Mrs. Ashwood, already irritated by the unfamiliar pressure of the Eastern woman's hand upon his bit. The thick dust which had forced the party of twenty to close up in two solid files across the road compelled them at the first opening in the roadside fence to take the field in a straggling gallop. Grant, eager to escape from his own discontented self by doing something for others, reined in beside Euphemia and the fair stranger.

"Let me take your place until Mrs. Ashwood's horse is quieted," he half whispered to Euphemia.

"Thank you, — and I suppose it does not make any matter to Clem who quiets mine," she said, with provoking eyes and a toss of her head worthy of the spirited animal she was riding.

"She thinks you quite capable of managing yourself and even others," he replied with a playful glance at Shipley, who was riding somewhat stiffly on the other side.

"Don't be too sure," retorted Phemie with

another dangerous look ; "I may give you trouble yet."

They were approaching the first undulation of the russet plain they had emerged upon, — an umbrageous slope that seemed suddenly to diverge in two defiles among the shaded hills. Grant had given a few words of practical advice to Mrs. Ashwood, and shown her how to guide her mustang by the merest caressing touch of the rein upon its sensitive neck. He had not been sympathetically inclined towards the fair stranger, a rich and still youthful widow, although he could not deny her unquestioned good breeding, mental refinement, and a certain languorous thoughtfulness that was almost melancholy, which accented her blonde delicacy. But he had noticed that her manner was politely reserved and slightly constrained towards the Harcourts, and he had already resented it with a lover's instinctive loyalty. He had at first attributed it to a want of sympathy between Mrs. Ashwood's more intellectual sentimentalities and the Harcourts' undeniable lack of any sentiment whatever. But there was evidently some other innate antagonism. He was very polite to Mrs. Ashwood ; she responded with a gentlewoman's courtesy, and,

he was forced to admit, even a broader comprehension of his own merits than the Harcourt girls had ever shown, but he could still detect that she was not in accord with the party.

"I am afraid you do not like California, Mrs. Ashwood?" he said pleasantly. "You perhaps find the life here too unrestrained and unconventional?"

She looked at him in quick astonishment. "Are you quite sincere? Why, it strikes me that this is just what it is *not*. And I have so longed for something quite different. From what I have been told about the originality and adventure of everything here, and your independence of old social forms and customs, I am afraid I expected the opposite of what I've seen. Why, this very party — except that the ladies are prettier and more expensively gotten up — is like any party that might have ridden out at Saratoga or New York."

"And as stupid, you would say."

"As *conventional*, Mr. Grant; always excepting this lovely creature beneath me, whom I can't make out and who does n't seem to care that I should. There! look! I told you so!"

Her mustang had suddenly bounded forward ; but as Grant followed he could see that the cause was the example of Phemie, who had, in some mad freak, dashed out in a frantic gallop. A half-dozen of the younger people hilariously accepted the challenge ; the excitement was communicated to the others, until the whole cavalcade was sweeping down the slope. Grant was still at Mrs. Ashwood's side, restraining her mustang and his own impatient horse when Clementina joined them. "Phemie's mare has really bolted, I fear," she said in a quick whisper, "ride on, and never mind us." Grant looked quickly ahead ; Phemie's roan, excited by the shouts behind her and to all appearance ungovernable, was fast disappearing with her rider. Without a word, trusting to his own good horsemanship and better knowledge of the ground, he darted out of the cavalcade to overtake her.

But the unfortunate result of this was to give further impulse to the now racing horses as they approached a point where the slope terminated in two diverging cañons. Mrs. Ashwood gave a sharp pull upon her bit. To her consternation the mustang stopped short almost instantly, — planting his two

fore feet rigidly in the dust and even sliding forward with the impetus. Had her seat been less firm she might have been thrown, but she recovered herself, although in doing so she still bore upon the bit, when to her astonishment the mustang deliberately stiffened himself as if for a shock, and then began to back slowly, quivering with excitement. She did not know that her native-bred animal fondly believed that he was participating in a *rodeo*, and that to his equine intelligence his fair mistress had just lassoed something! In vain she urged him forward; he still waited for the shock! When the cloud of dust in which she had been enwrapped drifted away, she saw to her amazement that she was alone. The entire party had disappeared into one of the cañons,—but which one she could not tell!

When she succeeded at last in urging her mustang forward again she determined to take the right-hand cañon and trust to being either met or overtaken. A more practical and less adventurous nature would have waited at the point of divergence for the return of some of the party, but Mrs. Ashwood was, in truth, not sorry to be left to herself and the novel scenery for a while,

and she had no doubt but she would eventually find her way to the hotel at San Mateo, which could not be far away, in time for luncheon.

The road was still well defined, although it presently began to wind between ascending ranks of pines and larches that marked the terraces of hills, so high that she wondered she had not noticed them from the plains. An unmistakable suggestion of some haunting primeval solitude, a sense of the hushed and mysterious proximity of a nature she had never known before, the strange half-intoxicating breath of unsunned foliage and untrodden grasses and herbs, all combined to exalt her as she cantered forward. Even her horse seemed to have acquired an intelligent liberty, or rather to have established a sympathy with her in his needs and her own longings; instinctively she no longer pulled him with the curb; the reins hung loosely on his self-arched and unfettered neck; secure in this loneliness she found herself even talking to him with barbaric freedom. As she went on, the vague hush of all things animate and inanimate around her seemed to thicken, until she unconsciously halted before a dim and pillared

wood, and a vast and heathless opening on whose mute brown lips Nature seemed to have laid the finger of silence. She forgot the party she had left, she forgot the luncheon she was going to; more important still she forgot that she had already left the traveled track far behind her, and, tremulous with anticipation, rode timidly into that arch of shadow.

As her horse's hoofs fell noiselessly on the elastic moss-carpeted aisle she forgot even more than that. She forgot the artificial stimulus and excitement of the life she had been leading so long; she forgot the small meannesses and smaller worries of her well-to-do experiences; she forgot herself, — rather she regained a self she had long forgotten. For in the sweet seclusion of this half darkened sanctuary the clinging fripperies of her past slipped from her as a tawdry garment. The petted, spoiled, and vapidly precocious girlhood which had merged into a womanhood of aimless triumphs and meaner ambitions; the worldly but miserable triumph of a marriage that had left her delicacy abused and her heart sick and unsatisfied; the wifehood without home, seclusion, or maternity; the widowhood that at

last brought relief, but with it the consciousness of hopelessly wasted youth, — all this seemed to drop from her here as lightly as the winged needles or noiseless withered spray from the dim gray vault above her head. In the sovereign balm of that woodland breath her better spirit was restored; somewhere in these wholesome shades seemed to still lurk what should have been her innocent and nymph-like youth, and to come out once more and greet her. Old songs she had forgotten, or whose music had failed in the discords of her frivolous life, sang themselves to her again in that sweet, grave silence; girlish dreams that she had foolishly been ashamed of, or had put away with her childish toys, stole back to her once more and became real in this tender twilight; old fancies, old fragments of verse and childish lore, grew palpable and moved faintly before her. The boyish prince who should have come was there; the babe that should have been hers was there! — she stopped suddenly with flaming eyes and indignant color. For it appeared that a *man* was there too, and had just risen from the fallen tree where he had been sitting.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHE had so far forgotten herself in yielding to the spell of the place, and in the revelation of her naked soul and inner nature, that it was with something of the instinct of outraged modesty that she seemed to shrink before this apparition of the outer world and outer worldliness. In an instant the nearer past returned; she remembered where she was, how she had come there, from whom she had come, and to whom she was returning. She could see that she had not only aimlessly wandered from the world but from the road; and for that instant she hated this man who had reminded her of it, even while she knew she must ask his assistance. It relieved her slightly to observe that he seemed as disturbed and impatient as herself, and as he took a pencil from between his lips and returned it to his pocket he scarcely looked at her.

But with her return to the world of *convenances* came its repression, and with a

gentlewoman's ease and modulated voice she leaned over her mustang's neck and said : " I have strayed from my party and am afraid I have lost my way. We were going to the hotel at San Mateo. Would you be kind enough to direct me there, or show me how I can regain the road by which I came ? "

Her voice and manner were quite enough to arrest him where he stood with a pleased surprise in his fresh and ingenuous face. She looked at him more closely. He was, in spite of his long silken mustache, so absurdly young ; he might, in spite of that youth, be so absurdly man-like ! What was he doing there ? Was he a farmer's son, an artist, a surveyor, or a city clerk out for a holiday ? Was there perhaps a youthful female of his species somewhere for whom he was waiting and upon whose tryst she was now breaking ? Was he — terrible thought ! — the outlying picket of some family picnic ? His dress, neat, simple, free from ostentatious ornament, betrayed nothing. She waited for his voice.

" Oh, you have left San Mateo miles away to the right," he said with quick youthful sympathy, " at least five miles ! Where did you leave your party ? "

His voice was winning, and even refined, she thought. She answered it quite spontaneously : " At a fork of two roads. I see now I took the wrong turning."

" Yes, you took the road to Crystal Spring. It's just down there in the valley, not more than a mile. You'd have been there now if you had n't turned off at the woods."

" I could n't help it, it was so beautiful."

" Is n't it ? "

" Perfect."

" And such shadows, and such intensity of color."

" Wonderful ! — and all along the ridge, looking down that defile ! "

" Yes, and that point where it seems as if you had only to stretch out your hand to pick a manzanita berry from the other side of the cañon, half a mile across ! "

" Yes, and that first glimpse of the valley through the Gothic gateway of rocks ! "

" And the color of those rocks, — cinnamon and bronze with the light green of the *Yerba buena* vine splashing over them."

" Yes, but for color *did* you notice that hillside of yellow poppies pouring down into the valley like a golden Niagara ? "

" Certainly, — and the perfect clearness of everything."

“And yet such complete silence and repose!”

“Oh, yes!”

“Ah, yes!”

They were both gravely nodding and shaking their heads with sparkling eyes and brightened color, looking not at each other but at the far landscape vignetted through a lozenge-shaped wind opening in the trees. Suddenly Mrs. Ashwood straightened herself in the saddle, looked grave, lifted the reins and apparently the ten years with them that had dropped from her. But she said in her easiest well-bred tones, and a half sigh, “Then I must take the road back again to where it forks?”

“Oh, no! you can go by Crystal Spring. It’s no further, and I’ll show you the way. But you’d better stop and rest yourself and your horse for a little while at the Springs Hotel. It’s a very nice place. Many people ride there from San Francisco to luncheon and return. I wonder that your party did n’t prefer it; and if they are looking for you, — as they surely must be,” he said, as if with a sudden conception of her importance, “they’ll come there when they find you’re not at San Mateo.”

This seemed reasonable, although the process of being "fetched" and taking the five miles ride, which she had enjoyed so much alone, in company was not attractive. "Could n't I go on at once?" she said impulsively.

"You would meet them sooner," he said thoughtfully.

This was quite enough for Mrs. Ashwood. "I think I'll rest this poor horse, who is really tired," she said with charming hypocrisy, "and stop at the hotel."

She saw his face brighten. Perhaps he was the son of the hotel proprietor, or a youthful partner himself. "I suppose you live here?" she suggested gently. "You seem to know the place so well."

"No," he returned quickly; "I only run down here from San Francisco when I can get a day off."

A day off! He was in some regular employment. But he continued: "And I used to go to boarding-school near here, and know all these woods well."

He must be a native! How odd! She had not conceived that there might be any other population here than the immigrants; perhaps that was what made him so interesting

and different from the others. "Then your father and mother live here?" she said.

His frank face, incapable of disguise, changed suddenly. "No," he said simply, but without any trace of awkwardness. Then after a slight pause he laid his hand — she noticed it was white and well kept — on her mustang's neck, and said, "If — if you care to trust yourself to me, I could lead you and your horse down a trail into the valley that is at least a third of the distance shorter. It would save you going back to the regular road, and there are one or two lovely views that I could show you. I should be so pleased, if it would not trouble you. There's a steep place or two — but I think there's no danger."

"I shall not be afraid."

She smiled so graciously, and, as she fully believed, maternally, that he looked at her the second time. To his first hurried impression of her as an elegant and delicately nurtured woman — one of the class of distinguished tourists that fashion was beginning to send thither — he had now to add that she had a quantity of fine silken-spun light hair gathered in a heavy braid beneath her gray hat; that her mouth was very deli-

cately lipped and beautifully sensitive ; that her soft skin, although just then touched with excitement, was a pale faded velvet, and seemed to be worn with ennui rather than experience ; that her eyes were hidden behind a strip of gray veil whence only a faint glow was discernible. To this must still be added a poetic fancy all his own that, as she sat there, with the skirt of her gray habit falling from her long bodiced waist over the mustang's fawn-colored flanks, and with her slim gauntleted hands lightly swaying the reins, she looked like Queen Guinevere in the forest. Not that he particularly fancied Queen Guinevere, or that he at all imagined himself Launcelot, but it was quite in keeping with the suggestion-haunted brain of John Milton Harcourt, whom the astute reader has of course long since recognized.

Preceding her through the soft carpeted vault with a woodman's instinct, — for there was apparently no trail to be seen, — the soft inner twilight began to give way to the outer stronger day, and presently she was startled to see the clear blue of the sky before her on apparently the same level as the brown pine-tessellated floor she was treading.

Not only did this show her that she was crossing a ridge of the upland, but a few moments later she had passed beyond the woods to a golden hillside that sloped towards a leafy, sheltered, and exquisitely-proportioned valley. A tiny but picturesque tower, and a few straggling roofs and gables, the flashing of a crystal stream through the leaves, and a narrow white ribbon of road winding behind it indicated the hostelry they were seeking. So peaceful and unfrequented it looked, nestling between the hills, that it seemed as if they had discovered it.

With his hand at times upon the bridle, at others merely caressing her mustang's neck, he led the way; there were a few breathless places where the crown of his straw hat appeared between her horse's reins, and again when she seemed almost slipping over on his shoulder, but they were passed with such frank fearlessness and invincible youthful confidence on the part of her escort that she felt no timidity. There were moments when a bit of the charmed landscape unfolding before them overpowered them both, and they halted to gaze, — sometimes without a word, or only a significant gesture

of sympathy and attention. At one of those artistic manifestations Mrs. Ashwood laid her slim gloved fingers lightly but unwittingly on John Milton's arm, and withdrew them, however, with a quick girlish apology and a foolish color which annoyed her more than the appearance of familiarity. But they were now getting well down into the valley; the court of the little hotel was already opening before them; their unconventional relations in the idyllic world above had changed; the new one required some delicacy of handling, and she had an idea that even the simplicity of the young stranger might be confusing.

"I must ask you to continue to act as my escort," she said, laughingly. "I am Mrs. Ashwood of Philadelphia, visiting San Francisco with my sister and brother, who are, I am afraid, even now hopelessly waiting luncheon for me at San Mateo. But as there seems to be no prospect of my joining them in time, I hope you will be able to give me the pleasure of your company, with whatever they may give us here in the way of refreshment."

"I shall be very happy," returned John Milton with unmistakable candor; "but

perhaps some of your friends will be arriving in quest of you, if they are not already here."

"Then they will join us or wait," said Mrs. Ashwood incisively, with her first exhibition of the imperiousness of a rich and pretty woman. Perhaps she was a little annoyed that her elaborate introduction of herself had produced no reciprocal disclosure by her companion. "Will you please send the landlord to me?" she added.

John Milton disappeared in the hotel as she cantered to the porch. In another moment she was giving the landlord her orders with the easy confidence of one who knew herself only as an always welcome and highly privileged guest, which was not without its effect. "And," she added carelessly, "when everything is ready you will please tell — Mr." —

"Harcourt," suggested the landlord promptly.

Mrs. Ashwood's perfectly trained face gave not the slightest sign of the surprise that had overtaken her. "Of course, — Mr. Harcourt."

"You know he's the son of the millionaire," continued the landlord, not at all unwilling to display the importance of the

habitues of Crystal Spring, "though they've quarreled and don't get on together."

"I know," said the lady languidly, "and, if any one comes here for *me*, ask them to wait in the parlor until I come."

Then, submitting herself and her dusty habit to the awkward ministration of the Irish chambermaid, she was quite thrilled with a delightful curiosity. She vaguely remembered that she had heard something of the Harcourt family discord, — but that was the divorced daughter surely! And this young man was Harcourt's son, and they had quarreled! A quarrel with a frank, open, ingenuous fellow like that — a mere boy — could only be the father's fault. Luckily she had never mentioned the name of Harcourt! She would not now; he need not know that it was his father who had originated the party; why should she make him uncomfortable for the few moments they were together?

There was nothing of this in her face as she descended and joined him. He thought that face handsome, well-bred, and refined. But this breeding and refinement seemed to him — in his ignorance of the world, possibly — as only a graceful concealment of a self of

which he knew nothing; and he was not surprised to find that her pretty gray eyes, now no longer hidden by her veil, really told him no more than her lips. He was a little afraid of her, and now that she had lost her naive enthusiasm he was conscious of a vague remorsefulness for his interrupted work in the forest. What was he doing here? He who had avoided the cruel, selfish world of wealth and pleasure, — a world that this woman represented, — the world that had stood apart from him in the one dream of his life — and had let Loo die! His quickly responsive face darkened.

“I am afraid I really interrupted you up there,” she said gently, looking in his face with an expression of unfeigned concern; “you were at work of some kind, I know, and I have very selfishly thought only of myself. But the whole scene was so new to me, and I so rarely meet any one who sees things as I do, that I know you will forgive me.” She bent her eyes upon him with a certain soft timidity. “You are an artist?”

“I am afraid not,” he said, coloring and smiling faintly; “I don’t think I could draw a straight line.”

“Don’t try to; they’re not pretty, and the

mere ability to draw them straight or curved does n't make an artist. But you are a *lover* of nature, I know, and from what I have heard you say I believe you can do what lovers cannot do, — make others feel as they do, — and that is what I call being an artist. You write? You are a poet?"

"Oh dear, no," he said with a smile, half of relief and half of naive superiority, "I'm a prose writer — on a daily newspaper."

To his surprise she was not disconcerted; rather a look of animation lit up her face as she said brightly, "Oh, then, you can of course satisfy my curiosity about something. You know the road from San Francisco to the Cliff House. Except for the view of the sea-lions when one gets there it's stupid; my brother says it's like all the San Francisco excursions, — a dusty drive with a julep at the end of it. Well, one day we were coming back from a drive there, and when we were beginning to wind along the brow of that dreadful staring Lone Mountain Cemetery, I said I would get out and walk, and avoid the obtrusive glitter of those tombstones rising before me all the way. I pushed open a little gate and passed in. Once among these funereal shrubs and cold

statuesque lilies everything was changed; I saw the staring tombstones no longer, for, like them, I seemed to be always facing the sea. The road had vanished; everything had vanished but the endless waste of ocean below me, and the last slope of rock and sand. It seemed to be the fittest place for a cemetery, — this end of the crumbling earth, — this beginning of the eternal sea. There! don't think that idea my own, or that I thought of it then. No, — I read it all afterwards, and that's why I'm telling you this."

She could not help smiling at his now attentive face, and went on: "Some days afterwards I got hold of a newspaper four or six months old, and there was a description of all that I thought I had seen and felt, — only far more beautiful and touching, as you shall see, for I cut it out of the paper and have kept it. It seemed to me that it must be some personal experience, — as if the writer had followed some dear friend there, — although it was with the unostentation and indefiniteness of true and delicate feeling. It impressed me so much that I went back there twice or thrice, and always seemed to move to the rhythm of that beautiful fu-

neral march — and I am afraid, being a woman, that I wandered around among the graves as though I could find out who it was that had been sung so sweetly, and if it were man or woman. I've got it here," she said, taking a dainty ivory porte-monnaie from her pocket and picking out with two slim finger-tips a folded slip of newspaper; "and I thought that may be you might recognize the style of the writer, and perhaps know something of his history. For I believe he has one. There! that is only a part of the article, of course, but it is the part that interested me. Just read from there," she pointed, leaning partly over his shoulder so that her soft breath stirred his hair, "to the end; it is n't long."

In the film that seemed to come across his eyes, suddenly the print appeared blurred and indistinct. But he knew that she had put into his hand something he had written after the death of his wife; something spontaneous and impulsive, when her loss still filled his days and nights and almost unconsciously swayed his pen. He remembered that his eyes had been as dim when he wrote it — and now — handed to him by this smiling, well-to-do woman, he was as shocked at

first as if he had suddenly found her reading his private letters. This was followed by a sudden sense of shame that he had ever thus publicly bared his feelings, and then by the illogical but irresistible conviction that it was false and stupid. The few phrases she had pointed out appeared as cheap and hollow rhetoric amid the surroundings of their social tête-à-tête over the luncheon-table. There was small danger that this heady wine of woman's praise would make him betray himself; there was no sign of gratified authorship in his voice as he quietly laid down the paper and said dryly: "I am afraid I can't help you. You know it may be purely fanciful."

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Ashwood thoughtfully. "At the same time it does n't strike me as a very abiding grief for that very reason. It's *too* sympathetic. It strikes me that it might be the first grief of some one too young to be inured to sorrow or experienced enough to accept it as the common lot. But like all youthful impressions it is very sincere and true while it lasts. I don't know whether one gets anything more real when one gets older."

With an insincerity he could not account

for, he now felt inclined to defend his previous sentiment, although all the while conscious of a certain charm in his companion's graceful skepticism. He had in his truthfulness and independence hitherto always been quite free from that feeble admiration of cynicism which attacks the intellectually weak and immature, and his present predilection may have been due more to her charming personality. She was not at all like his sisters; she had none of Clementina's cold abstraction, and none of Euphemia's sharp and demonstrative effusiveness. And in his secret consciousness of her flattering foreknowledge of him, with her assurance that before they had ever met he had unwittingly influenced her, he began to feel more at his ease. His fair companion also, in the equally secret knowledge she had acquired of his history, felt as secure as if she had been formally introduced. Nobody could find fault with her for showing civility to the ostensible son of her host; it was not necessary that she should be aware of their family differences. There was a charm too in their enforced isolation, in what was the exceptional solitude of the little hotel that day, and the seclusion of their table by the

window of the dining-room, which gave a charming domesticity to their repast. From time to time they glanced down the lonely cañon, losing itself in the afternoon shadow. Nevertheless Mrs. Ashwood's preoccupation with Nature did not preclude a human curiosity to hear something more of John Milton's quarrel with his father. There was certainly nothing of the prodigal son about him; there was no precocious evil knowledge in his frank eyes; no record of excesses in his healthy, fresh complexion; no unwholesome or disturbed tastes in what she had seen of his rural preferences and understanding of natural beauty. To have attempted any direct questioning that would have revealed his name and identity would have obliged her to speak of herself as his father's guest. She began indirectly; he had said he had been a reporter, and he was still a chronicler of this strange life. He had of course heard of many cases of family feuds and estrangements? Her brother had told her of some dreadful vendettas he had known in the Southwest, and how whole families had been divided. Since she had been here she had heard of odd cases of brothers meeting accidentally after long and unaccounted separa-

tions ; of husbands suddenly confronted with wives they had deserted ; of fathers encountering discarded sons !

John Milton's face betrayed no uneasy consciousness. If anything it was beginning to glow with a boyish admiration of the grace and intelligence of the fair speaker, that was perhaps heightened by an assumption of half coquettish discomfiture.

"You are laughing at me!" she said finally. "But inhuman and selfish as these stories may seem, and sometimes are, I believe that these curious estrangements and separations often come from some fatal weakness of temperament that might be strengthened, or some trivial misunderstanding that could be explained. It is separation that makes them seem irrevocable only because they are inexplicable, and a vague memory always seems more terrible than a definite one. Facts may be forgiven and forgotten, but mysteries haunt one always. I believe there are weak, sensitive people who dread to put their wrongs into shape ; those are the kind who sulk, and when you add separation to sulking, reconciliation becomes impossible. I knew a very singular case of that kind once. If you like, I'll tell it to

you. May be you will be able, some day, to weave it into one of your writings. And it's quite true."

It is hardly necessary to say that John Milton had not been touched by any personal significance in his companion's speech, whatever she may have intended ; and it is equally true that whether she had presently forgotten her purpose, or had become suddenly interested in her own conversation, her face grew more animated, her manner more confidential, and something of the youthful enthusiasm she had shown in the mountain seemed to come back to her.

"I might say it happened anywhere and call the people M. or N., but it really did occur in my own family, and although I was much younger at the time it impressed me very strongly. My cousin, who had been my playmate, was an orphan, and had been intrusted to the care of my father, who was his guardian. He was always a clever boy, but singularly sensitive and quick to take offense. Perhaps it was because the little property his father had left made him partly dependent on my father, and that I was rich, but he seemed to feel the disparity in our positions. I was too young to understand

it, I think it existed only in his imagination, for I believe we were treated alike. But I remember that he was full of vague threats of running away and going to sea, and that it was part of his weak temperament to terrify me with his extravagant confidences. I was always frightened when, after one of those scenes, he would pack his valise or perhaps only tie up a few things in a handkerchief, as in the advertisement pictures of the runaway slaves, and declare that we would never lay eyes upon him again. At first I never saw the ridiculousness of all this,—for I ought to have told you that he was a rather delicate and timid boy, and quite unfitted for a rough life or any exposure,—but others did, and one day I laughed at him and told him he was afraid. I shall never forget the expression of his face and never forgive myself for it. He went away,—but he returned the next day! He threatened once to commit suicide, left his clothes on the bank of the river, and came home in another suit of clothes he had taken with him. When I was sent abroad to school I lost sight of him; when I returned he was at college, apparently unchanged. When he came home for vacation,

far from having been subdued by contact with strangers, it seemed that his unhappy sensitiveness had been only intensified by the ridicule of his fellows. He had even acquired a most ridiculous theory about the degrading effects of civilization, and wanted to go back to a state of barbarism. He said the wilderness was the only true home of man. My father, instead of bearing with what I believe was his infirmity, dryly offered him the means to try his experiment. He started for some place in Texas, saying we would never hear from him again. A month after he wrote for more money. My father replied rather impatiently, I suppose, — I never knew exactly what he wrote. That was some years ago. He had told the truth at last, for we never heard from him again."

It is to be feared that John Milton was following the animated lips and eyes of the fair speaker rather than her story. Perhaps that was the reason why he said, "May he not have been a disappointed man?"

"I don't understand," she said simply.

"Perhaps," said John Milton with a boyish blush, "you may have unconsciously raised hopes in his heart — and" —

"I should hardly attempt to interest a

chronicler of adventure like you in such a very commonplace, every-day style of romance," she said, with a little impatience, "even if my vanity compelled me to make such confidences to a stranger. No, — it was nothing quite as vulgar as that. And," she added quickly, with a playfully amused smile as she saw the young fellow's evident distress, "I should have probably heard from him again. Those stories always end in that way."

"And you think?" — said John Milton.

"I think," said Mrs. Ashwood slowly, "that he actually did commit suicide — or effaced himself in some way, just as firmly as I believe he might have been saved by judicious treatment. Otherwise we should have heard from him. You'll say that's only a woman's reasoning — but I think our perceptions are often instinctive, and I knew his character."

Still following the play of her delicate features into a romance of his own weaving, the imaginative young reporter who had seen so much from the heights of Russian Hill said earnestly, "Then I have your permission to use this material at any future time?"

"Yes," said the lady smilingly.

"And you will not mind if I should take some liberties with the text?"

"I must of course leave something to your artistic taste. But you will let me see it?"

There were voices outside now, breaking the silence of the veranda. They had been so preoccupied as not to notice the arrival of a horseman. Steps came along the passage; the landlord returned. Mrs. Ashwood turned quickly towards him.

"Mr. Grant, of your party, ma'am, to fetch you."

She saw an unmistakable change in her young friend's mobile face. "I will be ready in a moment," she said to the landlord. Then, turning to John Milton, the arch-hypocrite said sweetly: "My brother must have known instinctively that I was in good hands, as he did n't come. But I am sorry, for I should have so liked to introduce him to you — although by the way," with a bright smile, "I don't think you have yet told me your name. I know I could n't have *forgotten* it."

"Harcourt," said John Milton, with a half-embarrassed laugh.

"But you must come and see me, Mr. — Mr. Harcourt," she said, producing a card from a case already in her fingers, "at my hotel, and let my brother thank you there for your kindness and gallantry to a stranger. I shall be here a few weeks longer before we go south to look for a place where my brother can winter. *Do* come and see me, although *I* cannot introduce you to anything as real and beautiful as what *you* have shown me to-day. Good-by, Mr. Harcourt; I won't trouble you to come down and bore yourself with my escort's questions and congratulations."

She bent her head and allowed her soft eyes to rest upon his with a graciousness that was beyond her speech, pulled her veil over her eyes again, with a pretty suggestion that she had no further use for them, and taking her riding-skirt lightly in her hand seemed to glide from the room.

On her way to San Mateo, where it appeared the disorganized party had prolonged their visit to accept an invitation to dine with a local magnate, she was pleasantly conversational with the slightly abstracted Grant. She was so sorry to have given them all this trouble and anxiety! Of course

she ought to have waited at the fork of the road, but she had never doubted but she could rejoin them presently on the main road. She was glad that Miss Euphemia's runaway horse had been stopped without accident; it would have been dreadful if anything had happened to *her*; Mr. Harcourt seemed so wrapped up in his girls. It was a pity they never had a son — Ah? Indeed! Then there was a son? So — and father and son had quarreled? That was so sad. And for some trifling cause, no doubt?

“I believe he married the housemaid,” said Grant grimly. “Be careful! — Allow me.”

“It's no use!” said Mrs. Ashwood, flushing with pink impatience, as she recovered her seat, which a sudden bolt of her mustang had imperiled, “I really can't make out the tricks of this beast! Thank you,” she added, with a sweet smile, “but I think I can manage him now. I can't see why he stopped. I'll be more careful. You were saying the son was married — surely not that boy!”

“Boy!” echoed Grant. “Then you know?” —

“I mean of course he must be a boy —

they all grew up here — and it was only five or six years ago that their parents emigrated,” she retorted a little impatiently.

“And what about this creature?”

“Your horse?”

“You know I mean the woman he married. Of course she was older than he — and caught him?”

“I think there was a year or two difference,” said Grant quietly.

“Yes, but your gallantry keeps you from telling the truth; which is that the women, in cases of this kind, are much older and more experienced.”

“Are they? Well, perhaps she is, *now*. She is dead.”

Mrs. Ashwood walked her horse. “Poor thing,” she said. Then a sudden idea took possession of her and brought a film to her eyes. “How long ago?” she asked in a low voice.

“About six or seven months, I think. I believe there was a baby who died too.”

She continued to walk her horse slowly, stroking its curved neck. “I think it’s perfectly shameful!” she said suddenly.

“Not so bad as that, Mrs. Ashwood, surely. The girl may have loved him — and he” —

“You know perfectly what I mean, Mr. Grant. I speak of the conduct of the mother and father and those two sisters!”

Grant slightly elevated his eyebrows. “But you forget, Mrs. Ashwood. It was young Harcourt and his wife’s own act. They preferred to take their own path and keep it.”

“I think,” said Mrs. Ashwood authoritatively, “that the idea of leaving those two unfortunate children to suffer and struggle on alone — out there — on the sand hills of San Francisco — was simply disgraceful!”

Later that evening she was unreasonably annoyed to find that her brother, Mr. John Shipley, had taken advantage of the absence of Grant to pay marked attention to Clementina, and had even prevailed upon that imperious goddess to accompany him after dinner on a moonlight stroll upon the veranda and terraces of *Los Pajaros*. Nevertheless she seemed to recover her spirits enough to talk volubly of the beautiful scenery she had discovered in her late perilous abandonment in the wilds of the Coast Range; to aver her intention to visit it again; to speak of it in a severely practical way as offering a far better site for the cottages of the

young married couples just beginning life than the outskirts of towns or the bleak sand hills of San Francisco; and thence by graceful degrees into a dissertation upon popular fallacies in regard to hasty marriages, and the mistaken idea of some parents in not accepting the inevitable and making the best of it. She still found time to enter into an appreciative and exhaustive criticism upon the literature and journalistic enterprise of the Pacific Coast with the proprietor of the "Pioneer," and to cause that gentleman to declare that whatever people might say about rich and fashionable Eastern women, that Mrs. Ashwood's head was about as level as it was pretty.

The next morning found her more thoughtful and subdued, and when her brother came upon her sitting on the veranda, while the party were preparing to return, she was reading a newspaper slip that she had taken from her porte-monnaie, with a face that was partly shadowed.

"What have you struck there, Conny?" said her brother gayly. "It looks too serious for a recipe."

"Something I should like you to read some time, Jack," she said, lifting her

lashes with a slight timidity, "if you would take the trouble. I really wonder how it would impress you."

"Pass it over," said Jack Shipley good-humoredly, with his cigar between his lips. "I'll take it now."

She handed him the slip and turned partly away; he took it, glanced at it sideways, turned it over, and suddenly his look grew concentrated, and he took the cigar from his lips.

"Well," she said playfully, turning to him again. "What do you think of it?"

"Think of it?" he said with a rising color. "I think it's infamous! Who did it?"

She stared at him, then glanced quickly at the slip. "What are you reading?" she said.

"This, of course," he said impatiently. "What you gave me." But he was pointing to *the other side* of the newspaper slip.

She took it from him impatiently and read for the first time the printing on the reverse side of the article she had treasured so long. It was the concluding paragraph of an apparently larger editorial. "One thing is certain, that a man in Daniel Har-

court's position cannot afford to pass over in silence accusations like the above, that affect not only his private character, but the integrity of his title to the land that was the foundation of his fortune. When trickery, sharp practice, and even criminality in the past are more than hinted at, they cannot be met by mere pompous silence or allusions to private position, social prestige, or distinguished friends in the present."

Mrs. Ashwood turned the slip over with scornful impatience, a pretty uplifting of her eyebrows and a slight curl of her lip. "I suppose none of those people's beginnings can bear looking into — and they certainly should be the last ones to find fault with anybody. But, good gracious, Jack! what has this to do with you?"

"With me?" said Shipley angrily. "Why, I proposed to Clementina last night!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE wayfarers on the Tasajara turnpike, whom Mr. Daniel Harcourt passed with his fast trotting mare and sulky, saw that their great fellow-townsmen was more than usually preoccupied and curt in his acknowledgment of their salutations. Nevertheless as he drew near the creek, he partly checked his horse, and when he reached a slight acclivity of the interminable plain — which had really been the bank of the creek in bygone days — he pulled up, alighted, tied his horse to a rail fence, and clambering over the inclosure made his way along the ridge. It was covered with nettles, thistles, and a few wiry dwarf larches of native growth; dust from the adjacent highway had invaded it, with a few scattered and torn handbills, waste paper, rags, empty provision cans, and other suburban débris. Yet it was the site of 'Lige Curtis's cabin, long since erased and forgotten. The bed of the old creek had receded; the last *tules*

had been cleared away; the channel and *embarcadero* were half a mile from the bank and log whereon the pioneer of Tasajara had idly sunned himself.

Mr. Harcourt walked on, occasionally turning over the scattered objects with his foot, and stopping at times to examine the ground more closely. It had not apparently been disturbed since he himself, six years ago, had razed the wretched shanty and carried off its timbers to aid in the erection of a larger cabin further inland. He raised his eyes to the prospect before him, — to the town with its steamboats lying at the wharves, to the grain elevator, the warehouses, the railroad station with its puffing engines, the flagstaff of Harcourt House and the clustering roofs of the town, and beyond, the painted dome of his last creation, the Free Library. This was all *his* work, *his* planning, *his* foresight, whatever they might say of the wandering drunkard from whose tremulous fingers he had snatched the opportunity. They could not take *that* from him, however they might follow him with envy and reviling, any more than they could wrest from him the five years of peaceful possession. It was with something of the

prosperous consciousness with which he had mounted the platform on the opening of the Free Library, that he now climbed into his buggy and drove away.

Nevertheless he stopped at his Land Office as he drove into town, and gave a few orders. "I want a strong picket fence put around the fifty-*vara* lot in block fifty-seven, and the ground cleared up at once. Let me know when the men get to work, and I'll overlook them."

Reëntering his own house in the square, where Mrs. Harcourt and Clementina — who often accompanied him in those business visits — were waiting for him with luncheon, he smiled somewhat superciliously as the servant informed him that "Professor Grant had just arrived." Really that man was trying to make the most of his time with Clementina! Perhaps the rival attractions of that Boston swell Shipley had something to do with it! He must positively talk to Clementina about this. In point of fact he himself was a little disappointed in Grant, who, since his offer to take the task of hunting down his calumniators, had really done nothing. He turned into his study, but was slightly astonished to find that Grant, in-

stead of paying court to Clementina in the adjoining drawing-room, was sitting rather thoughtfully in his own armchair.

He rose as Harcourt entered. "I did n't let them announce me to the ladies," he said, "as I have some important business with you first, and we may find it necessary that I should take the next train back to town. You remember that a few weeks ago I offered to look into the matter of those slanders against you. I apprehended it would be a trifling matter of envy or jealousy on the part of your old associates or neighbors which could be put straight with a little good feeling; but I must be frank with you, Harcourt, and say at the beginning that it turns out to be an infernally ugly business. Call it conspiracy if you like, or organized hostility, I'm afraid it will require a lawyer rather than an arbitrator to manage it, and the sooner the better. For the most unpleasant thing about it is, that I can't find out exactly *how bad* it is!"

Unfortunately the weaker instinct of Harcourt's nature was first roused; the vulgar rage which confounds the bearer of ill news with the news itself filled his breast. "And this is all that your confounded intermeddling came to?" he said brutally.

“No,” said Grant quietly, with a preoccupied ignoring of the insult that was more hopeless for Harcourt. “I found out that it is claimed that this ‘Lige Curtis was not drowned nor lost that night; but that he escaped, and for three years has convinced another man that you are wrongfully in possession of this land; that these two naturally hold you in their power, and that they are only waiting for you to be forced into legal proceedings for slander to prove all their charges. Until then, for some reason best known to themselves, Curtis remains in the background.”

“Does he deny the deed under which I hold the property?” said Harcourt savagely.

“He says it was only a security for a trifling loan, and not an actual transfer.”

“And don’t those fools know that his security could be forfeited?”

“Yes, but not in the way it is recorded in the county clerk’s office. They say that the record shows that there was an interpolation in the paper he left with you — which was a forgery. Briefly, Harcourt, you are accused of that. More, — it is intimated that when he fell into the creek that

night, and escaped on a raft that was floating past, that he had been first stunned by a blow from some one interested in getting rid of him."

He paused and glanced out of the window.

"Is that all?" asked Harcourt in a perfectly quiet, steady voice.

"All!" replied Grant, struck with the change in his companion's manner, and turning his eyes upon him quickly.

The change indeed was marked and significant. Whether from relief at knowing the worst, or whether he was experiencing the same reaction from the utter falsity of this last accusation that he had felt when Grant had unintentionally wronged him in his previous recollection, certain it is that some unknown reserve of strength in his own nature, of which he knew nothing before, suddenly came to his aid in this extremity. It invested him with an uncouth dignity that for the first time excited Grant's respect.

"I beg your pardon, Grant, for the hasty way I spoke to you a moment ago, for I thank you, and appreciate thoroughly and sincerely what you have done. You are right; it is a

matter for fighting and not fussing over. But I must have a head to hit. Whose is it?"

"The man who holds himself legally responsible is Fletcher,—the proprietor of the 'Clarion,' and a man of property."

"The 'Clarion'? That is the paper which began the attack?" said Harcourt.

"Yes, and it is only fair to tell you here that your son threw up his place on it in consequence of its attack upon you."

There was perhaps the slightest possible shrinking in Harcourt's eyelids — the one congenital likeness to his discarded son — but his otherwise calm demeanor did not change. Grant went on more cheerfully: "I've told you all I know. When I spoke of an unknown *worst*, I did not refer to any further accusation, but to whatever evidence they might have fabricated or suborned to prove any one of them. It is only the strength and fairness of the hands they hold that is uncertain. Against that you have your certain uncontested possession, the peculiar character and antecedents of this 'Lige Curtis, which would make his evidence untrustworthy and even make it difficult for them to establish his identity. I am told

that his failure to contest your appropriation of his property is explained by the fact of his being absent from the country most of the time; but again, this would not account for their silence until within the last six months, unless they have been waiting for further evidence to establish it. But even then they must have known that the time of recovery had passed. You are a practical man, Harcourt; I need n't tell you therefore what your lawyer will probably tell you, that practically, so far as your rights are concerned, you remain as before these calumnies; that a cause of action unprosecuted or in abeyance is practically no cause, and that it is not for you to anticipate one. *But* —

He paused and looked steadily at Harcourt. Harcourt met his look with a dull, ox-like stolidity. "I shall begin the suit at once," he said.

"And I," said Grant, holding out his hand, "will stand by you. But tell me now what you knew of this man Curtis, — his character and disposition; it may be some clue as to what are his methods and his intentions."

Harcourt briefly sketched 'Lige Curtis as he knew him and understood him. It was

another indication of his reserved power that the description was so singularly clear, practical, unprejudiced, and impartial that it impressed Grant with its truthfulness.

"I can't make him out," he said; "you have drawn a weak, but neither a dishonest nor malignant man. There must have been somebody behind him. Can you think of any personal enemy?"

"I have been subjected to the usual jealousy and envy of my old neighbors, I suppose, but nothing more. I have harmed no one knowingly."

Grant was silent; it had flashed across him that Rice might have harbored revenge for his father-in-law's interference in his brief matrimonial experience. He had also suddenly recalled his conversation with Billings on the day that he first arrived at Tasajara. It would not be strange if this man had some intimation of the secret. He would try to find him that evening. He rose.

"You will stay to dinner? My wife and Clementina will expect you."

"Not to-night; I am dining at the hotel," said Grant, smilingly; "but I will come in later in the evening if I may." He paused hesitatingly for a moment. "Have your

wife and daughter ever expressed any opinion on this matter?"

"No," said Harcourt. "Mrs. Harcourt knows nothing of anything that does not happen *in* the house; Euphemia knows only the things that happen out of it where she is visiting — and I suppose that young men prefer to talk to her about other things than the slanders of her father. And Clementina — well, you know how calm and superior to these things *she* is."

"For that very reason I thought that perhaps she might be able to see them more clearly, — but no matter! I dare say you are quite right in not discussing them at home." This was the fact, although Grant had not forgotten that Harcourt had put forward his daughters as a reason for stopping the scandal some weeks before, — a reason which, however, seemed never to have been borne out by any apparent sensitiveness of the girls themselves.

When Grant had left, Harcourt remained for some moments steadfastly gazing from the window over the Tasajara plain. He had not lost his look of concentrated power, nor his determination to fight. A struggle between himself and the phantoms of the

past had become now a necessary stimulus for its own sake, — for the sake of his mental and physical equipoise. He saw before him the pale, agitated, irresolute features of 'Lige Curtis, — not the man *he* had injured, but the man who had injured *him*, whose spirit was aimlessly and wantonly — for he had never attempted to get back his possessions in his lifetime, nor ever tried to communicate with the possessor — striking at him in the shadow. And it was *that* man, that pale, writhing, frightened wretch whom he had once mercifully helped! Yes, whose *life* he had even saved that night from exposure and delirium tremens when he had given him the whiskey. And this life he had saved, only to have it set in motion a conspiracy to ruin him! Who knows that 'Lige had not purposely conceived what they had believed to be an attempt at suicide, only to cast suspicion of murder on *him*! From which it will be perceived that Harcourt's powers of moral reasoning had not improved in five years, and that even the impartiality he had just shown in his description of 'Lige to Grant had been swallowed up in this new sense of injury. The founder of Tasajara, whose cool business logic, un-

failing foresight, and practical deductions were never at fault, was once more childishly adrift in his moral ethics.

And there was Clementina, of whose judgment Grant had spoken so persistently, — could she assist him? It was true, as he had said, he had never talked to her of his affairs. In his sometimes uneasy consciousness of her superiority he had shrunk from even revealing his anxieties, much less his actual secret, and from anything that might prejudice the lofty paternal attitude he had taken towards his daughters from the beginning of his good fortune. He was never quite sure if her acceptance of it was real; he was never entirely free from a certain jealousy that always mingled with his pride in her superior rectitude; and yet his feeling was distinct from the good-natured contempt he had for his wife's loyalty, the anger and suspicion that his son's opposition had provoked, and the half-affectionate toleration he had felt for Euphemia's waywardness. However he would sound Clementina without betraying himself.

He was anticipated by a slight step in the passage and the pushing open of his study door. The tall, graceful figure of the girl herself stood in the opening.

“They tell me Mr. Grant has been here. Does he stay to dinner?”

“No, he has an engagement at the hotel, but he will probably drop in later. Come in, Clemmy, I want to talk to you. Shut the door and sit down.”

She slipped in quietly, shut the door, took a seat on the sofa, softly smoothed down her gown, and turned her graceful head and serenely composed face towards him. Sitting thus she looked like some finely finished painting that decorated rather than belonged to the room, — not only distinctly alien to the flesh and blood relative before her, but to the house, and even the local, monotonous landscape beyond the window with the shining new shingles and chimneys that cut the new blue sky. These singular perfections seemed to increase in Harcourt's mind the exasperating sense of injury inflicted upon him by 'Lige's exposures. With a daughter so incomparably gifted, — a matchless creation that was enough in herself to ennoble that fortune which his own skill and genius had lifted from the muddy *tules* of Tasajara where this 'Lige had left it, — that *she* should be subjected to this annoyance seemed an infamy that Providence could not

allow! What was his mere venial transgression to this exaggerated retribution?

"Clemmy, girl, I'm going to ask you a question. Listen, pet." He had begun with a reminiscent tenderness of the epoch of her childhood, but meeting the unresponding maturity of her clear eyes he abandoned it. "You know, Clementina, I have never interfered in your affairs, nor tried to influence your friendships for anybody. Whatever people may have to say of me they can't say that! I've always trusted you, as I would myself, to choose your own associates; I have never regretted it, and I don't regret it now. But I'd like to know — I have reasons to-day for asking — how matters stand between you and Grant."

The Parian head of Minerva on the book-case above her did not offer the spectator a face less free from maidenly confusion than Clementina's at that moment. Her father had certainly expected none, but he was not prepared for the perfect coolness of her reply.

"Do you mean, have I *accepted* him?"

"No, — well — yes."

"No, then! Is that what he wished to see you about? It was understood that he

was not to allude again to the subject to any one."

"He has not to *me*. It was only my own idea. He had something very different to tell me. You may not know, Clementina," he begun cautiously, "that I have been lately the subject of some anonymous slanders, and Grant has taken the trouble to track them down for me. It is a calumny that goes back as far as Sidon, and I may want your level head and good memory to help me to refute it." He then repeated calmly and clearly, with no trace of the fury that had raged within him a moment before, the substance of Grant's revelation.

The young girl listened without apparent emotion. When he had finished she said quickly: "And what do you want me to recollect?"

The hardest part of Harcourt's task was coming. "Well, don't you remember that I told you the day the surveyors went away — that — I had bought this land of 'Lige Curtis some time before?"

"Yes, I remember your saying so, but" —

"But what?"

"I thought you only meant that to satisfy mother."

Daniel Harcourt felt the blood settling round his heart, but he was constrained by an irresistible impulse to know the worst.

"Well, what did *you* think it really was?"

"I only thought that 'Lige Curtis had simply let you have it, that 's all."

Harcourt breathed again. "But what for? Why should he?"

"Well — *on my account.*"

"On *your* account! What in Heaven's name had *you* to do with it?"

"He loved me." There was not the slightest trace of vanity, self-consciousness or coquetry in her quiet, fateful face, and for this very reason Harcourt knew that she was speaking the truth.

"Loved *you*! — you, Clementina! — my daughter! Did he ever *tell* you so?"

"Not in words. He used to walk up and down on the road when I was at the back window or in the garden, and often hung about the bank of the creek for hours, like some animal. I don't think the others saw him, and when they did they thought it was Parmlee for Euphemia. Even Euphemia thought so too, and that was why she was so conceited and hard to Parmlee towards the end. She thought it was Parmlee that night

when Grant and Rice came ; but it was 'Lige Curtis who had been watching the window lights in the rain, and who must have gone off at last to speak to you in the store. I always let Phemie believe that it was Parmelee, — it seemed to please her."

There was not the least tone of mischief or superiority, or even of patronage in her manner. It was as quiet and cruel as the fate that might have led 'Lige to his destruction. Even her father felt a slight thrill of awe as she paused. "Then he never really spoke to you?" he asked hurriedly.

"Only once. I was gathering swamp lilies all alone, a mile below the bend of the creek, and he came upon me suddenly. Perhaps it was that I did n't jump or start — *I* did n't see anything to jump or start at — that he said, 'You're not frightened at me, Miss Harcourt, like the other girls? You don't think I'm drunk or half mad — as they do?' I don't remember exactly what I said, but it meant that whether he was drunk or half mad or sober I did n't see any reason to be afraid of him. And then he told me that if I was fond of swamp lilies I might have all I wanted at his place, and for the matter of that the place too, as he was going away, for

he could n't stand the loneliness any longer. He said that he had nothing in common with the place and the people — no more than *I* had — and that was what he had always fancied in me. I told him that if he felt in that way about his place he ought to leave it, or sell it to some one who cared for it, and go away. That must have been in his mind when he offered it to you, — at least that's what I thought when you told us you had bought it. I did n't know but what he might have told you, but you did n't care to say it before mother."

Mr. Harcourt sat gazing at her with breathless amazement. "And you — think that — 'Lige Curtis — lov — liked you?"

"Yes, I think he did — and that he does now!"

"*Now!* What do you mean? The man is dead!" said Harcourt starting.

"That's just what I don't believe."

"Impossible! Think of what you are saying."

"I never could quite understand or feel that he was dead when everybody said so, and now that I've heard this story I *know* that he is living."

"But why did he not make himself known in time to claim the property?"

"Because he did not care for it."

"What did he care for, then?"

"Me, I suppose."

"But this calumny is not like a man who loves you."

"It is like a *jealous* one."

With an effort Harcourt threw off his bewildered incredulity and grasped the situation. He would have to contend with his enemy in the flesh and blood, but that flesh and blood would be very weak in the hands of the impassive girl beside him. His face lightened.

The same idea might have been in Clementina's mind when she spoke again, although her face had remained unchanged. "I do not see why *you* should bother yourself further about it," she said. "It is only a matter between myself and him; you can leave it to me."

"But if you are mistaken and he should not be living?"

"I am not mistaken. I am even certain now that I have seen him."

"Seen him!"

"Yes," said the girl with the first trace of animation in her face. "It was four or five months ago when we were visiting the

Briones at Monterey. We had ridden out to the old Mission by moonlight. There were some Mexicans lounging around the *posada*, and one of them attracted my attention by the way he seemed to watch me, without revealing any more of his face than I could see between his *serape* and the black silk handkerchief that was tied around his head under his *sombrero*. But I knew he was an American — and his eyes were familiar. I believe it was he."

"Why did you not speak of it before?"

The look of animation died out of the girl's face. "Why should I?" she said listlessly. "I did not know of these reports then. He was nothing more to us. You would n't have cared to see him again." She rose, smoothed out her skirt and stood looking at her father. "There is one thing, of course, that you'll do at once."

Her voice had changed so oddly that he said quickly: "What's that?"

"Call Grant off the scent. He'll only frighten or exasperate your game, and that's what you don't want."

Her voice was as imperious as it had been previously listless. And it was the first time he had ever known her to use slang.

It seemed as startling as if it had fallen from the marble lips above him.

"But I've promised him that we should go together to my lawyer to-morrow, and begin a suit against the proprietors of the 'Clarion.'"

"Do nothing of the kind. Get rid of Grant's assistance in this matter; and see the 'Clarion' proprietor yourself. What sort of a man is he? Can you invite him to your house?"

"I have never seen him; I believe he lives at San José. He is a wealthy man and a large land owner there. You understand that after the first article appeared in his paper, and I knew that he had employed your brother — although Grant says that he had nothing to do with it and left Fletcher on account of it — I could have no intercourse with him. Even if I invited him he would not come."

"He *must* come. Leave it to *me*." She stopped and resumed her former impassive manner. "I had something to say to you too, father. Mr. Shipley proposed to me the day we went to San Mateo."

Her father's eyes lit with an eager sparkle. "Well," he said quickly.

"I reminded him that I had known him only a few weeks, and that I wanted time to consider."

"Consider! Why, Clemmy, he's one of the oldest Boston families, rich from his father and grandfather — rich when I was a shopkeeper and your mother" —

"I thought you liked Grant?" she said quietly.

"Yes, but if *you* have no choice nor feeling in the matter, why Shipley is far the better man. And if any of the scandal should come to his ears" —

"So much the better that the hesitation should come from me. But if you think it better, I can sit down here and write to him at once declining the offer." She moved towards the desk.

"No! No! I did not mean that," said Harcourt quickly. "I only thought that if he did hear anything it might be said that he had backed out."

"His sister knows of his offer, and though she don't like it nor me, she will not deny the fact. By the way, you remember when she was lost that day on the road to San Mateo?"

"Yes."

"Well, she was with your son, John Milton, all the time, and they lunched together at Crystal Spring. It came out quite accidentally through the hotel-keeper."

Harcourt's brow darkened. "Did she know him before?"

"I can't say; but she does now."

Harcourt's face was heavy with distrust. "Taking Shipley's offer and these scandals into consideration, I don't like the look of this, Clementina."

"I do," said the girl simply.

Harcourt gazed at her keenly and with the shadow of distrust still upon him. It seemed to be quite impossible, even with what he knew of her calmly cold nature, that she should be equally uninfluenced by Grant or Shipley. Had she some steadfast, lofty ideal, or perhaps some already absorbing passion of which he knew nothing? She was not a girl to betray it — they would only know it when it was too late. Could it be possible that there was still something between her and 'Lige that he knew nothing of? The thought struck a chill to his breast. She was walking towards the door, when he recalled himself with an effort.

"If you think it advisable to see Fletcher,

you might run down to San José for a day or two with your mother, and call on the Ramirez. They may know him or somebody who does. Of course if *you* meet him and casually invite him it would be different."

"It's a good idea," she said quickly. "I'll do it, and speak to mother now."

He was struck by the change in her face and voice; they had both nervously lightened, as oddly and distinctly as they had before seemed to grow suddenly harsh and aggressive. She passed out of the room with girlish brusqueness, leaving him alone with a new and vague fear in his consciousness.

A few hours later Clementina was standing before the window of the drawing-room that overlooked the outskirts of the town. The moonlight was flooding the vast bluish Tasajara levels with a faint lustre, as if the waters of the creek had once more returned to them. In the shadow of the curtain beside her Grant was facing her with anxious eyes.

"Then I must take this as your final answer, Clementina?"

"You must. And had I known of these

calumnies before, had you been frank with me even the day we went to San Mateo, my answer would have been as final then, and you might have been spared any further suspense. I am not blaming you, Mr. Grant; I am willing to believe that you thought it best to conceal this from me, — even at that time when you had just pledged yourself to find out its truth or falsehood, — yet my answer would have been the same. So long as this stain rests on my father's name I shall never allow that name to be coupled with yours in marriage or engagement; nor will my pride or yours allow us to carry on a simple friendship after this. I thank you for your offer of assistance, but I cannot even accept that which might to others seem to allow some contingent claim. I would rather believe that when you proposed this inquiry and my father permitted it, you both knew that it put an end to any other relations between us."

"But, Clementina, you are wrong, believe me! Say that I have been foolish, indiscreet, mad, — still the few who knew that I made these inquiries on your father's behalf know nothing of my hopes of *you*!"

"But *I* do, and that is enough for me."

Even in the hopeless preoccupation of his passion he suddenly looked at her with something of his old critical scrutiny. But she stood there calm, concentrated, self-possessed and upright. Yes! it was possible that the pride of this Southwestern shopkeeper's daughter was greater than his own.

"Then you banish me, Clementina?"

"It is we whom *you* have banished."

"Good-night."

"Good-by."

He bent for an instant over her cold hand, and then passed out into the hall. She remained listening until the front door closed behind him. Then she ran swiftly through the hall and up the staircase, with an alacrity that seemed impossible to the stately goddess of a moment before. When she had reached her bedroom and closed the door, so exuberant still and so uncontrollable was her levity and action, that without going round the bed which stood before her in the centre of the room, she placed her two hands upon it and lightly vaulted sideways across it to reach the window. There she watched the figure of Grant crossing the moonlit square. Then turning back into the half-lit room, she ran to the small dressing-glass

placed at an angle on a toilet table against the wall. With her palms grasping her knees she stooped down suddenly and contemplated the mirror. It showed what no one but Clementina had ever seen, — and she herself only at rare intervals, — the laughing eyes and soul of a self-satisfied, material-minded, ordinary country-girl !

CHAPTER X.

BUT Mr. Lawrence Grant's character in certain circumstances would seem to have as startling and inexplicable contradictions as Clementina Harcourt's, and three days later he halted his horse at the entrance of Los Gatos Rancho. The Home of the Cats — so called from the catamounts which infested the locality — which had for over a century lazily basked before one of the hottest cañons in the Coast Range, had lately been stirred into some activity by the American, Don Diego Fletcher, who had bought it, put up a saw-mill, and deforested the canon. Still there remained enough suggestion of a feline haunt about it to make Grant feel as if he had tracked hither some stealthy enemy, in spite of the peaceful intimation conveyed by the sign on a rough boarded shed at the wayside, that the "Los Gatos Land and Lumber Company" held their office there.

A cigarette-smoking *peon* lounged before the door. Yes; Don Diego was there, but

as he had arrived from Santa Clara only last night and was going to Colonel Ramirez that afternoon, he was engaged. Unless the business was important — but the cool, determined manner of Grant, even more than his words, signified that it *was* important, and the servant led the way to Don Diego's presence.

There certainly was nothing in the appearance of this sylvan proprietor and newspaper capitalist to justify Grant's suspicion of a surreptitious foe. A handsome man scarcely older than himself, in spite of a wavy mass of perfectly white hair which contrasted singularly with his brown mustache and dark sunburned face. So disguising was the effect of these contradictions, that he not only looked unlike anybody else, but even his nationality seemed to be a matter of doubt. Only his eyes, light blue and intelligent, which had a singular expression of gentleness and worry, appeared individual to the man. His manner was cultivated and easy. He motioned his visitor courteously to a chair.

"I was referred to you," said Grant, almost abruptly, "as the person responsible for a series of slanderous attacks against

Mr. Daniel Harcourt in the 'Clarion,' of which paper I believe you are the proprietor. I was told that you declined to give the authority for your action, unless you were forced to by legal proceedings."

Fletcher's sensitive blue eyes rested upon Grant's with an expression of constrained pain and pity. "I heard of your inquiries, Mr. Grant; you were making them on behalf of this Mr. Harcourt or Harkutt" — he made the distinction with intentional deliberation — "with a view, I believe, to some arbitration. The case was stated to you fairly, I think; I believe I have nothing to add to it."

"That was your answer to the ambassador of Mr. Harcourt," said Grant, coldly, "and as such I delivered it to him; but I am here to-day to speak on my own account."

What could be seen of Mr. Fletcher's lips appeared to curl in an odd smile. "Indeed, I thought it was — or would be — all in the family."

Grant's face grew more stern, and his gray eyes glittered. "You'll find my *status* in this matter so far independent that I don't propose, like Mr. Harcourt, either to begin a suit or to rest quietly under the calumny.

Briefly, Mr. Fletcher, as you or your informant knows, I was the surveyor who revealed to Mr. Harcourt the value of the land to which he claimed a title from your man, — this Elijah or 'Lige Curtis as you call him," — he could not resist this imitation of his adversary's supercilious affectation of precise nomenclature, — "and it was upon my representation of its value as an investment that he began the improvements which have made him wealthy. If this title was fraudulently obtained, all the facts pertaining to it are sufficiently related to connect me with the conspiracy."

"Are you not a little hasty in your presumption, Mr. Grant?" said Fletcher, with unfeigned surprise.

"That is for *me* to judge, Mr. Fletcher," returned Grant, haughtily.

"But the name of Professor Grant is known to all California as beyond the breath of calumny or suspicion."

"It is because of that fact that I propose to keep it so."

"And may I ask in what way you wish me to assist you in so doing?"

"By promptly and publicly retracting in the 'Clarion' every word of this slander against Harcourt."

Fletcher looked steadfastly at the speaker.

“And if I decline?”

“I think you have been long enough in California, Mr. Fletcher, to know the alternative expected of a gentleman,” said Grant, coldly.

Mr. Fletcher kept his gentle blue eyes — in which surprise still overbalanced their expression of pained concern — on Grant’s face.

“But is not this more in the style of Colonel Starbottle than Professor Grant?” he asked, with a faint smile.

Grant rose instantly with a white face. “You will have a better opportunity of judging,” he said, “when Colonel Starbottle has the honor of waiting upon you from me. Meantime, I thank you for reminding me of the indiscretion into which my folly, in still believing that this thing could be settled amicably, has led me.”

He bowed coldly and withdrew. Nevertheless, as he mounted his horse and rode away, he felt his cheeks burning. Yet he had acted upon calm consideration; he knew that to the ordinary Californian experience there was nothing quixotic nor exaggerated in the attitude he had taken. Men had

quarreled and fought on less grounds; he had even half convinced himself that he *had* been insulted, and that his own professional reputation demanded the withdrawal of the attack on Harcourt on purely business grounds; but he was not satisfied of the personal responsibility of Fletcher nor of his gratuitous malignity. Nor did the man look like a tool in the hands of some unscrupulous and hidden enemy. However, he had played his card. If he succeeded only in provoking a duel with Fletcher, he at least would divert the public attention from Harcourt to himself. He knew that his superior position would throw the lesser victim in the background. He would make the sacrifice; that was his duty as a gentleman, even if *she* would not care to accept it as an earnest of his unselfish love!

He had reached the point where the mountain track entered the Santa Clara turnpike when his attention was attracted by a handsome but old-fashioned carriage drawn by four white mules, which passed down the road before him and turned suddenly off into a private road. But it was not this picturesque gala equipage of some local Spanish grandee that brought a thrill to his nerves and

a flash to his eye; it was the unmistakable, tall, elegant figure and handsome profile of Clementina, reclining in light gauzy wraps against the back seat! It was no fanciful resemblance, the outcome of his reverie, — there never was any one like her! — it *was* she herself! But what was she doing here?

A *vaquero* cantered from the cross road where the dust of the vehicle still hung. Grant hailed him. Ah! it was a fine *carroza de cuatro mulas* that he had just passed! *Si*, Señor, truly; it was of Don José Ramirez, who lived just under the hill. It was bringing company to the *casa*.

Ramirez! That was where Fletcher was going! Had Clementina known that he was one of Fletcher's friends? Might she not be exposed to unpleasantness, marked coolness, or even insult in that unexpected meeting? Ought she not to be warned or prepared for it? She had banished Grant from her presence until this stain was removed from her father's name, but could she blame him for trying to save her from contact with her father's slanderer? No! He turned his horse abruptly into the cross road and spurred forward in the direction of the *casa*.

It was quite visible now — a low-walled,

quadrangular mass of whitewashed adobe lying like a drift on the green hillside. The carriage and four had far preceded him, and was already half up the winding road towards the house. Later he saw them reach the courtyard and disappear within. He would be quite in time to speak with her before she retired to change her dress. He would simply say that while making a professional visit to Los Gatos Land Company office he had become aware of Fletcher's connection with it, and accidentally of his intended visit to Ramirez. His chance meeting with the carriage on the highway had determined his course.

As he rode into the courtyard he observed that it was also approached by another road, evidently nearer Los Gatos, and probably the older and shorter communication between the two ranchos. The fact was significantly demonstrated a moment later. He had given his horse to a servant, sent in his card to Clementina, and had dropped listlessly on one of the benches of the gallery surrounding the *patio*, when a horseman rode briskly into the opposite gateway, and dismounted with a familiar air. A waiting *peon* who recognized him informed

him that the Doña was engaged with a visitor, but that they were both returning to the gallery for chocolate in a moment. The stranger was the man he had left only an hour before — Don Diego Fletcher !

In an instant the idiotic fatuity of his position struck him fully. His only excuse for following Clementina had been to warn her of the coming of this man who had just entered, and who would now meet her as quickly as himself. For a brief moment the idea of quietly slipping out to the corral, mounting his horse again, and flying from the rancho, crossed his mind ; but the thought that he would be running away from the man he had just challenged, and perhaps some new hostility that had sprung up in his heart against him, compelled him to remain. The eyes of both men met ; Fletcher's in half - wondering annoyance, Grant's in ill-concealed antagonism. What they would have said is not known, for at that moment the voices of Clementina and Mrs. Ramirez were heard in the passage, and they both entered the gallery. The two men were standing together ; it was impossible to see one without the other.

And yet Grant, whose eyes were instantly

directed to Clementina, thought that she had noted neither. She remained for an instant standing in the doorway in the same self-possessed, coldly graceful pose he remembered she had taken on the platform at Tasajara. Her eyelids were slightly downcast, as if she had been arrested by some sudden thought or some shy maiden sensitiveness; in her hesitation Mrs. Ramirez passed impatiently before her.

“Mother of God!” said that lively lady, regarding the two speechless men, “is it an indiscretion we are making here—or are you dumb? You, Don Diego, are loud enough when you and Don José are together; at least introduce your friend.”

Grant quickly recovered himself. “I am afraid,” he said, coming forward, “unless Miss Harcourt does, that I am a mere trespasser in your house, Señora. I saw her pass in your carriage a few moments ago, and having a message for her I ventured to follow her here.”

“It is Mr. Grant, a friend of my father’s,” said Clementina, smiling with equanimity, as if just awakening from a momentary abstraction, yet apparently unconscious of Grant’s imploring eyes; “but the other

gentleman I have not the pleasure of knowing."

"Ah! Don Diego Fletcher, a countryman of yours; and yet I think he knows you not."

Clementina's face betrayed no indication of the presence of her father's foe, and yet Grant knew that she must have recognized his name, as she looked towards Fletcher with perfect self-possession. He was too much engaged in watching her to take note of Fletcher's manifest disturbance, or the evident effort with which he at last bowed to her. That this unexpected double meeting with the daughter of the man he had wronged, and the man who had espoused the quarrel, should be confounding to him appeared only natural. But he was unprepared to understand the feverish alacrity with which he accepted Doña Maria's invitation to chocolate, or the equally animated way in which Clementina threw herself into her hostess's Spanish levity. He knew it was an awkward situation, that must be surmounted without a scene; he was quite prepared in the presence of Clementina to be civil to Fletcher; but it was odd that in this feverish exchange of courtesies and compli-

ments *he*, Grant, should feel the greater awkwardness, and be the most ill at ease. He sat down and took his part in the conversation; he let it transpire for Clementina's benefit that he had been to Los Gatos only on business, yet there was no opportunity for even a significant glance, and he had the added embarrassment of seeing that she exhibited no surprise nor seemed to attach the least importance to his inopportune visit. In a miserable indecision he allowed himself to be carried away by the high-flown hospitality of his Spanish hostess, and consented to stay to an early dinner. It was part of the infelicity of circumstance that the voluble Doña Maria — electing him as the distinguished stranger above the resident Fletcher — monopolized him and attached him to her side. She would do the honors of her house; she must show him the ruins of the old Mission beside the corral; Don Diego and Clementina would join them presently in the garden. He cast a despairing glance at the placidly smiling Clementina, who was apparently equally indifferent to the evident constraint and assumed ease of the man beside her, and turned away with Mrs. Ramirez.

A silence fell upon the gallery so deep that the receding voices and footsteps of Grant and his hostess in the long passage were distinctly heard until they reached the end. Then Fletcher arose with an inarticulate exclamation. Clementina instantly put her finger to her lips, glanced around the gallery, extended her hand to him, and saying "Come," half-led, half-dragged him into the passage. To the right she turned and pushed open the door of a small room that seemed a combination of boudoir and oratory, lit by a French window opening to the garden, and flanked by a large black and white crucifix with a *prie Dieu* beneath it. Closing the door behind them she turned and faced her companion. But it was no longer the face of the woman who had been sitting in the gallery; it was the face that had looked back at her from the mirror at Tasajara the night that Grant had left her—eager, flushed, material with commonplace excitement!

"'Lige Curtis," she said.

"Yes," he answered passionately, "'Lige Curtis, whom you thought dead! 'Lige Curtis, whom you once pitied, condoled with and despised! 'Lige Curtis, whose lands and

property have enriched you ! 'Lige Curtis, who would have shared it with you freely at the time, but whom your father juggled and defrauded of it ! 'Lige Curtis, branded by him as a drunken outcast and suicide ! 'Lige Curtis " —

" Hush ! " She clapped her little hand over his mouth with a quick but awkward school-girl gesture, inconceivable to any who had known her usual languid elegance of motion, and held it there. He struggled angrily, impatiently, reproachfully, and then, with a sudden characteristic weakness that seemed as much of a revelation as her once hoydenish manner, kissed it, when she let it drop. Then placing both her hands still girlishly on her slim waist and curtseying grotesquely before him, she said : " 'Lige Curtis ! Oh, yes ! 'Lige Curtis, who swore to do everything for me ! 'Lige Curtis, who promised to give up liquor for me, — who was to leave Tasajara for me ! 'Lige Curtis, who was to reform, and keep his land as a nest-egg for us both in the future, and then who sold it — and himself — and me — to dad for a glass of whiskey ! 'Lige Curtis, who disappeared, and then let us think he was dead, only that he might attack us out of the ambush of his grave ! "

“Yes, but think what *I* have suffered all these years ; not for the cursed land — you know I never cared for that — but for *you*, — you, Clementina, — *you* rich, admired by every one ; idolized, held far above me, — *me*, the forgotten outcast, the wretched suicide — and yet the man to whom you had once plighted your troth. Which of those greedy fortune-hunters whom my money — my life-blood as you might have thought it was — attracted to you, did you care to tell that you had ever slipped out of the little garden gate at Sidon to meet that outcast ! Do you wonder that as the years passed and *you* were happy, *I* did not choose to be so forgotten ? Do you wonder that when *you* shut the door on the past *I* managed to open it again — if only a little way — that its light might startle you ? ”

Yet she did not seem startled or disturbed, and remained only looking at him critically.

“You say that you have suffered,” she replied with a smile. “You don’t look it ! Your hair is white, but it is becoming to you, and you are a handsomer man, ’Lige Curtis, than you were when I first met you ; you are finer,” she went on, still regarding him, “stronger and healthier than you were five

years ago ; you are rich and prosperous, you have everything to make you happy, but ” — here she laughed a little, held out both her hands, taking his and holding his arms apart in a rustic, homely fashion — “ but you are still the same old 'Lige Curtis ! It was like you to go off and hide yourself in that idiotic way ; it was like you to let the property slide in that stupid, unselfish fashion ; it was like you to get real mad, and say all those mean, silly things to dad, that did n't hurt him — in your regular looney style ; for rich or poor, drunk or sober, ragged or elegant, plain or handsome, — you're always the same 'Lige Curtis ! ”

In proportion as that material, practical, rustic self — which nobody but 'Lige Curtis had ever seen — came back to her, so in proportion the irresolute, wavering, weak and emotional vagabond of Sidon came out to meet it. He looked at her with a vague smile ; his five years of childish resentment, albeit carried on the shoulders of a man mentally and morally her superior, melted away. He drew her towards him, yet at the same moment a quick suspicion returned.

“ Well, and what are you doing here ?

Has this man who has followed you any right, any claim upon you ? ”

“None but what you in your folly have forced upon him ! You have made him father’s ally. I don’t know why he came here. I only know why *I* did — to find *you* ! ”

“ You suspected then ? ”

“ I *knew* ! Hush ! ”

The returning voices of Grant and of Mrs. Ramirez were heard in the courtyard. Clementina made a warning yet girlishly mirthful gesture, again caught his hand, drew him quickly to the French window, and slipped through it with him into the garden, where they were quickly lost in the shadows of a ceanothus hedge.

“ They have probably met Don José in the orchard, and as he and Don Diego have business together, Doña Clementina has without doubt gone to her room and left them. For you are not very entertaining to the ladies to-day, — you two *caballeros* ! You have much politics together, eh ? — or you have discussed and disagreed, eh ? I will look for the Señorita, and let you go, Don Distruido ! ”

It is to be feared that Grant’s apologies and attempts to detain her were equally feeble,

—as it seemed to him that this was the only chance he might have of seeing Clementina except in company with Fletcher. As Mrs. Ramirez left he lit a cigarette and listlessly walked up and down the gallery. But Clementina did not come, neither did his hostess return. A subdued step in the passage raised his hopes, — it was only the grizzled *major domo*, to show him his room that he might prepare for dinner.

He followed mechanically down the long passage to a second corridor. There was a chance that he might meet Clementina, but he reached his room without encountering any one. It was a large vaulted apartment with a single window, a deep embrasure in the thick wall that seemed to focus like a telescope some forgotten, sequestered part of the leafy garden. While washing his hands, gazing absently at the green vignette framed by the dark opening, his attention was drawn to a movement of the foliage, stirred apparently by the rapid passage of two half-hidden figures. The quick flash of a feminine skirt seemed to indicate the coy flight of some romping maid of the *casa*, and the pursuit and struggle of her *vaquero* swain. To a despairing lover even the spectacle of inno-

cent, pastoral happiness in others is not apt to be soothing, and Grant was turning impatiently away when he suddenly stopped with a rigid face and quickly approached the window. In her struggles with the unseen Corydon, the clustering leaves seemed to have yielded at the same moment with the coy Chloris, and parting — disclosed a stolen kiss! Grant's hand lay like ice against the wall. For, disengaging Fletcher's arm from her waist and freeing her skirt from the foliage, it was the calm, passionless Clementina herself who stepped out, and moved pensively towards the *casa*.

CHAPTER XI.

“READERS of the ‘Clarion’ will have noticed that allusion has been frequently made in these columns to certain rumors concerning the early history of Tasajara which were supposed to affect the pioneer record of Daniel Harcourt. It was deemed by the conductors of this journal to be only consistent with the fearless and independent duty undertaken by the ‘Clarion’ that these rumors should be fully chronicled as part of the information required by the readers of a first-class newspaper, unbiased by any consideration of the social position of the parties, but simply as a matter of news. For this the ‘Clarion’ does not deem it necessary to utter a word of apology. But for that editorial comment or attitude which the proprietors felt was justified by the reliable sources of their information they now consider it only due in honor to themselves, their readers, and Mr. Harcourt to fully and freely apologize. A patient and laborious

investigation enables them to state that the alleged facts published by the 'Clarion' and copied by other journals are utterly unsupported by testimony, and the charges — although more or less vague — which were based upon them are equally untenable. We are now satisfied that one 'Elijah Curtis,' a former pioneer of Tasajara who disappeared five years ago, and was supposed to be drowned, has not only made no claim to the Tasajara property, as alleged, but has given no sign of his equally alleged resuscitation and present existence, and that on the minutest investigation there appears nothing either in his disappearance, or the transfer of his property to Daniel Harcourt, that could in any way disturb the uncontested title to Tasajara or the unimpeachable character of its present owner. The whole story now seems to have been the outcome of one of those stupid rural hoaxes too common in California."

"Well," said Mrs. Ashwood, laying aside the 'Clarion' with a skeptical shrug of her pretty shoulders, as she glanced up at her brother; "I suppose this means that you are going to propose again to the young lady?"

"I have," said Jack Shipley, "that's the worst of it — and got my answer before this came out."

"Jack!" said Mrs. Ashwood, thoroughly surprised.

"Yes! You see, Conny, as I told you three weeks ago, she said she wanted time to consider, — that she scarcely knew me, and all that! Well, I thought it was n't exactly a gentleman's business to seem to stand off after that last attack on her father, and so, last week, I went down to San José, where she was staying, and begged her not to keep me in suspense. And, by Jove! she froze me with a look, and said that with these aspersions on her father's character, she preferred not to be under obligations to any one."

"And you believed her?"

"Oh, hang it all! Look here, Conny, — I wish you'd just try for once to find out some good in that family, besides what that sentimental young widower John Milton may have. You seem to think because they've quarreled with *him* there isn't a virtue left among them."

Far from seeming to offer any suggestion of feminine retaliation, Mrs. Ashwood smiled sweetly. "My dear Jack, I have no desire

to keep you from trying your luck again with Miss Clementina, if that's what you mean, and indeed I shouldn't be surprised if a family who felt a *mésalliance* as sensitively as the Harcourts felt that affair of their son's, would be as keenly alive to the advantages of a good match for their daughter. As to young Mr. Harcourt, he never talked to me of the vices of his family, nor has he lately troubled me much with the presence of his own virtues. I haven't heard from him since we came here."

"I suppose he is satisfied with the government berth you got for him," returned her brother dryly.

"He was very grateful to Senator Flynn, who appreciates his talents, but who offered it to him as a mere question of fitness," replied Mrs. Ashwood with great precision of statement. "But you don't seem to know he declined it on account of his other work."

"Preferred his old Bohemian ways, eh? You can't change those fellows, Conny. They can't get over the fascinations of vagabondage. Sorry your lady-patroness scheme did n't work. Pity you could n't have promoted him in the line of his profession, as the Grand Duchess of Girolstein did Fritz."

"For Heaven's sake, Jack, go to Clementina! You may not be successful, but there at least the perfect gentlemanliness and good taste of your illustrations will not be thrown away."

"I think of going to San Francisco tomorrow, anyway," returned Jack with affected carelessness. "I'm getting rather bored with this wild seaside watering place and its glitter of ocean and hopeless background of mountain. It's nothing to me that there's no land nearer than Japan' out there. It may be very healthful to the tissues, but it's weariness to the spirit, and I don't see why we can't wait at San Francisco till the rains send us further south, as well as here."

He had walked to the balcony of their sitting-room in the little seaside hotel where this conversation took place, and gazed discontentedly over the curving bay and sandy shore before him. After a slight pause Mrs. Ashwood stepped out beside him.

"Very likely I may go with you," she said, with a perceptible tone of weariness. "We will see after the post arrives."

"By the way, there is a little package for you in my room, that came this morning. I

brought it up, but forgot to give it to you. You 'll find it on my table."

Mrs. Ashwood abstractedly turned away and entered her brother's room from the same balcony. The forgotten parcel, which looked like a roll of manuscript, was lying on his dressing-table. She gazed attentively at the handwriting on the wrapper and then gave a quick glance around her. A sudden and subtle change came over her. She neither flushed nor paled, nor did the delicate lines of expression in her face quiver or change. But as she held the parcel in her hand her whole being seemed to undergo some exquisite suffusion. As the medicines which the Arabian physician had concealed in the hollow handle of the mallet permeated the languid royal blood of Persia, so some volatile balm of youth seemed to flow in upon her with the contact of that strange missive and transform her weary spirit.

"Jack!" she called, in a high clear voice.

But Jack had already gone from the balcony when she reached it with an elastic step and a quick youthful swirl and rustling of her skirt. He was lighting his cigar in the garden.

"Jack," she said, leaning half over the

railing, "come back here in an hour and we'll talk over that matter of yours again."

Jack looked up eagerly and as if he might even come up then, but she added quickly, "In about an hour — I must think it over," and withdrew.

She reëntered the sitting-room, shut the door carefully and locked it, half pulled down the blind, walking once or twice around the table on which the parcel lay, with one eye on it like a graceful cat. Then she suddenly sat down, took it up with a grave practical face, examined the postmark curiously, and opened it with severe deliberation. It contained a manuscript and a letter of four closely written pages. She glanced at the manuscript with bright approving eyes, ran her fingers through its leaves and then laid it carefully and somewhat ostentatiously on the table beside her. Then, still holding the letter in her hand, she rose and glanced out of the window at her bored brother lounging towards the beach and at the heaving billows beyond, and returned to her seat. This apparently important preliminary concluded, she began to read.

There were, as already stated, four blessed pages of it! All vital, earnest, palpitating

with youthful energy, preposterous in premises, precipitate in conclusions, — yet irresistible and convincing to every woman in their illogical sincerity. There was not a word of love in it, yet every page breathed a wholesome adoration; there was not an epithet or expression that a greater prude than Mrs. Ashwood would have objected to, yet every sentence seemed to end in a caress. There was not a line of poetry in it, and scarcely a figure or simile, and yet it was poetical. Boyishly egotistic as it was in attitude, it seemed to be written less *of* himself than *to* her; in its delicate because unconscious flattery, it made her at once the provocation and excuse. And yet so potent was its individuality that it required no signature. No one but John Milton Harcourt could have written it. His personality stood out of it so strongly that once or twice Mrs. Ashwood almost unconsciously put up her little hand before her face with a half mischievous, half-deprecating smile, as if the big honest eyes of its writer were upon her.

It began by an elaborate apology for declining the appointment offered him by one of her friends, which he was bold enough to think had been prompted by her kind heart.

That was like her, but yet what she might do to any one; and he preferred to think of her as the sweet and gentle lady who had recognized his merit without knowing him, rather than the powerful and gracious benefactress who wanted to reward him when she did know him. The crown that she had all unconsciously placed upon his head that afternoon at the little hotel at Crystal Spring was more to him than the Senator's appointment; perhaps he was selfish, but he could not bear that she who had given so much should believe that he could accept a lesser gift. All this and much more! Some of it he had wanted to say to her in San Francisco at times when they had met, but he could not find the words. But she had given him the courage to go on and do the only thing he was fit for, and he had resolved to stick to that, and perhaps do something once more that might make him hear again her voice as he had heard it that day, and again see the light that had shone in her eyes as she sat there and read. And this was why he was sending her a manuscript. She might have forgotten that she had told him a strange story of her cousin who had disappeared — which she thought he might at some time

work up. Here it was. Perhaps she might not recognize it again, in the way he had written it here ; perhaps she did not really mean it when she had given him permission to use it, but he remembered her truthful eyes and believed her — and in any event it was hers to do with what she liked. It had been a great pleasure for him to write it and think that she would see it ; it was like seeing her himself — that was in *his better self* — more worthy the companionship of a beautiful and noble woman than the poor young man she would have helped. This was why he had not called the week before she went away. But for all that, she had made his life less lonely, and he should be ever grateful to her. He could never forget how she unconsciously sympathized with him that day over the loss that had blighted his life forever, — yet even then he did not know that she, herself, had passed through the same suffering. But just here the stricken widow of thirty, after a vain attempt to keep up the knitted gravity of her eyebrows, bowed her dimpling face over the letter of the blighted widower of twenty, and laughed so long and silently that the tears stood out like dew on her light-brown eyelashes.

But she became presently severe again, and finished her reading of the letter gravely. Then she folded it carefully, deposited it in a box on her table, which she locked. After a few minutes, however, she unlocked the box again and transferred the letter to her pocket. The serenity of her features did not relax again, although her previous pretty prepossession of youthful spirit was still indicated in her movements. Going into her bedroom, she reappeared in a few minutes with a light cloak thrown over her shoulders and a white-trimmed broad-brimmed hat. Then she rolled up the manuscript in a paper, and called her French maid. As she stood there awaiting her with the roll in her hand, she might have been some young girl on her way to her music lesson.

“If my brother returns before I do, tell him to wait.”

“Madame is going” —

“Out,” said Mrs. Ashwood blithely, and tripped downstairs.

She made her way directly to the shore where she remembered there was a group of rocks affording a shelter from the north-west trade winds. It was reached at low water by a narrow ridge of sand, and here

she had often basked in the sun with her book. It was here that she now unrolled John Milton's manuscript and read.

It was the story she had told him, but interpreted by his poetry and adorned by his fancy until the facts as she remembered them seemed to be no longer hers, or indeed truths at all. She had always believed her cousin's unhappy temperament to have been the result of a moral and physical idiosyncrasy, — she found it here to be the effect of a lifelong and hopeless passion for herself! The ingenious John Milton had given a poet's precocity to the youth whom she had only known as a suspicious, moody boy, had idealized him as a sensitive but songless Byron, had given him the added infirmity of pulmonary weakness, and a handkerchief that in moments of great excitement, after having been hurriedly pressed to his pale lips, was withdrawn "with a crimson stain." Opposed to this interesting figure — the more striking to her as she had been hitherto haunted by the impression that her cousin during his boyhood had been subject to facial eruption and boils — was her own equally idealized self. Cruelly kind to her cousin and gentle with

his weaknesses while calmly ignoring their cause, leading him unconsciously step by step in his fatal passion, he only became aware by accident that she nourished an ideal hero in the person of a hard, proud, middle-aged practical man of the world,—her future husband ! At this picture of the late Mr. Ashwood, who had really been an indistinctive social *bon vivant*, his amiable relict grew somewhat hysterical. The discovery of her real feelings drove the consumptive cousin into a secret, self-imposed exile on the shores of the Pacific, where he hoped to find a grave. But the complete and sudden change of life and scene, the balm of the wild woods and the wholesome barbarism of nature, wrought a magical change in his physical health and a philosophical rest in his mind. He married the daughter of an Indian chief. Years passed, the heroine — a rich and still young and beautiful widow — unwittingly sought the same medicinal solitude. Here in the depth of the forest she encountered her former playmate ; the passion which he had fondly supposed was dead revived in her presence, and for the first time she learned from his bearded lips the secret of his pas-

sion. Alas! not *she* alone! The contiguous forest could not be bolted out, and the Indian wife heard all. Recognizing the situation with aboriginal directness of purpose, she committed suicide in the fond belief that it would reunite the survivors. But in vain; the cousins parted on the spot to meet no more.

Even Mrs. Ashwood's predilection for the youthful writer could not overlook the fact that the dénouement was by no means novel nor the situation human, but yet it was here that she was most interested and fascinated. The description of the forest was a description of the wood where she had first met Harcourt; the charm of it returned, until she almost seemed to again inhale its balsamic freshness in the pages before her. Now, as then, her youth came back with the same longing and regret. But more bewildering than all, it was herself that moved there, painted with the loving hand of the narrator. For the first time she experienced the delicious flattery of seeing herself as only a lover could see her. The smallest detail of her costume was suggested with an accuracy that pleasantly thrilled her feminine sense. The grace of her figure slowly

moving through the shadow, the curves of her arm and the delicacy of her hand that held the bridle rein, the gentle glow of her softly rounded cheek, the sweet mystery of her veiled eyes and forehead, and the escaping gold of her lovely hair beneath her hat were all in turn masterfully touched or tenderly suggested. And when to this was added the faint perfume of her nearer presence — the scent she always used — the delicate revelations of her withdrawn gauntlet, the bracelet clasping her white wrist, and at last the thrilling contact of her soft hand on his arm, — she put down the manuscript and blushed like a very girl. Then she started.

A shout! — *his* voice surely! — and the sound of oars in their rowlocks.

An instant revulsion of feeling overtook her. With a quick movement she instantly hid the manuscript beneath her cloak and stood up erect and indignant. Not twenty yards away, apparently advancing from the opposite shore of the bay, was a boat. It contained only John Milton, resting on his oars and scanning the group of rocks anxiously. His face, which was quite strained with anxiety, suddenly flushed when he saw her, and then recognizing the unmistakable

significance of her look and attitude, paled once more. He bent over his oars again ; a few strokes brought him close to the rock.

"I beg your pardon," he said hesitatingly, as he turned towards her and laid aside his oars, "but — I thought — you were — in danger."

She glanced quickly round her. She had forgotten the tide ! The ledge between her and the shore was already a foot under brown sea-water. Yet if she had not thought that it would look ridiculous, she would have leaped down even then and waded ashore.

"It's nothing," she said coldly, with the air of one to whom the situation was an everyday occurrence ; "it's only a few steps and a slight wetting — and my brother would have been here in a moment more."

John Milton's frank eyes made no secret of his mortification. "I ought not to have disturbed you, I know," he said quickly, "I had no right. But I was on the other shore opposite and I saw you come down here — that is " — he blushed prodigiously — "I thought it *might* be you — and I ventured — I mean — won't you let me row you ashore?"

There seemed to be no reasonable excuse for refusing. She slipped quickly into the boat without waiting for his helping hand, avoiding that contact which only a moment ago she was trying to recall.

A few strokes brought them ashore. He continued his explanation with the hopeless frankness and persistency of youth and inexperience. "I only came here the day before yesterday. I would not have come, but Mr. Fletcher, who has a cottage on the other shore, sent for me to offer me my old place on the 'Clarion.' I had no idea of intruding upon your privacy by calling here without permission."

Mrs. Ashwood had resumed her conventional courtesy without however losing her feminine desire to make her companion pay for the agitation he had caused her. "We would have been always pleased to see you," she said vaguely, "and I hope, as you are here now, you will come with me to the hotel. My brother" —

But he still retained his hold of the boat-rope without moving, and continued, "I saw you yesterday, through the telescope, sitting in your balcony ; and later at night I think it was your shadow I saw near the blue

shaded lamp in the sitting-room by the window, — I don't mean the *red lamp* that you have in your own room. I watched you until you put out the blue lamp and lit the red one. I tell you this — because — because — I thought you might be reading a manuscript I sent you. At least," he smiled faintly, "I *liked* to think it so."

In her present mood this struck her only as persistent and somewhat egotistical. But she felt herself now on ground where she could deal firmly with him.

"Oh, yes," she said gravely. "I got it and thank you very much for it. I intended to write to you."

"Don't," he said, looking at her fixedly. "I can see you don't like it."

"On the contrary," she said promptly, "I think it beautifully written, and very ingenious in plot and situation. Of course it is n't the story I told you — I did n't expect that, for I'm not a genius. The man is not at all like my cousin, you know, and the woman — well really, to tell the truth, *she* is simply inconceivable!"

"You think so?" he said gravely. He had been gazing abstractedly at some shining brown seaweed in the water, and when

he raised his eyes to hers they seemed to have caught its color.

"Think so? I'm positive! There's no such a woman; she is n't *human*. But let us walk to the hotel."

"Thank you, but I must go back now."

"But at least let my brother thank you for taking his place — in rescuing me. It was so thoughtful in you to put off at once when you saw I was surrounded. I might have been in great danger."

"Please don't make fun of me, Mrs. Ashwood," he said with a faint return of his boyish smile. "You know there was no danger. I have only interrupted you in a nap or a reverie — and I can see now that you evidently came here to be alone."

Holding the manuscript more closely hidden under the folds of her cloak, she smiled enigmatically. "I think I *did*, and it seems that the tide thought so too, and acted upon it. But you will come up to the hotel with me, surely?"

"No, I am going back now." There was a sudden firmness about the young fellow which she had never before noticed. This was evidently the creature who had married in spite of his family.

"Won't you come back long enough to take your manuscript? I will point out the part I refer to, and — we will talk it over."

"There is no necessity. I wrote to you that you might keep it; it is yours; it was written for you and none other. It is quite enough for me to know that you were good enough to read it. But will you do one thing more for me? Read it again! If you find anything in it the second time to change your views — if you find"—

"I will let you know," she said quickly.

"I will write to you as I intended."

"No, I did n't mean that. I meant that if you found the woman less inconceivable and more human, don't write to me, but put your red lamp in your window instead of the blue one. I will watch for it and see it."

"I think I will be able to explain myself much better with simple pen and ink," she said dryly, "and it will be much more useful to you."

He lifted his hat gravely, shoved off the boat, leaped into it, and before she could hold out her hand was twenty feet away. She turned and ran quickly up the rocks. When she reached the hotel, she could see the boat already half across the bay.

Entering her sitting-room she found that her brother, tired of waiting for her, had driven out. Taking the hidden manuscript from her cloak she tossed it with a slight gesture of impatience on the table. Then she summoned the landlord.

“Is there a town across the bay?”

“No! the whole mountain-side belongs to Don Diego Fletcher. He lives away back in the coast range at Los Gatos, but he has a cottage and mill on the beach.”

“Don Diego Fletcher — Fletcher! Is he a Spaniard then?”

“Half and half, I reckon; he’s from the lower country, I believe.”

“Is he here often?”

“Not much; he has mills at Los Gatos, wheat ranches at Santa Clara, and owns a newspaper in ‘Frisco! But he’s here now. There were lights in his house last night, and his cutter lies off the point.”

“Could you get a small package and note to him?”

“Certainly; it is only a row across the bay.”

“Thank you.”

Without removing her hat and cloak she sat down at the table and began a letter to

Don Diego Fletcher. She begged to inclose to him a manuscript which she was satisfied, for the interests of its author, was better in his hands than hers. It had been given to her by the author, Mr. J. M. Harcourt, whom she understood was engaged on Mr. Fletcher's paper, the "*Clarion*." In fact, it had been written at *her* suggestion, and from an incident in real life of which she was cognizant. She was sorry to say that on account of some very foolish criticism of her own as to the *facts*, the talented young author had become so dissatisfied with it as to make it possible that, if left to himself, this very charming and beautifully written story would remain unpublished. As an admirer of Mr. Harcourt's genius, and a friend of his family, she felt that such an event would be deplorable, and she therefore begged to leave it to Mr. Fletcher's delicacy and tact to arrange with the author for its publication. She knew that Mr. Fletcher had only to read it to be convinced of its remarkable literary merit, and she again would impress upon him the fact that her playful and thoughtless criticism — which was personal and confidential — was only based upon the circumstances that the author had really

made a more beautiful and touching story than the poor facts which she had furnished seemed to warrant. She had only just learned the fortunate circumstance that Mr. Fletcher was in the neighborhood of the hotel where she was staying with her brother.

With the same practical, business-like directness, but perhaps a certain unbusiness-like haste superadded, she rolled up the manuscript and dispatched it with the letter.

This done, however, a slight reaction set in, and having taken off her hat and shawl, she dropped listlessly on a chair by the window, but as suddenly rose and took a seat in the darker part of the room. She felt that she had done right, — that highest but most depressing of human convictions! It was entirely for his good. There was no reason why his best interests should suffer for his folly. If anybody was to suffer it was she. But what nonsense was she thinking! She would write to him later when she was a little cooler, — as she had said. But then he had distinctly told her, and very rudely too, that he did n't want her to write. Wanted her to make *signals* to him, — the idiot! and probably was even now watching her with a telescope. It was really too preposterous!

The result was that her brother found her on his return in a somewhat uncertain mood, and, as a counselor, variable and conflicting in judgment. If this Clementina, who seemed to have the family qualities of obstinacy and audacity, really cared for him, she certainly would n't let delicacy stand in the way of letting him know it — and he was therefore safe to wait a little. A few moments later, she languidly declared that she was afraid that she was no counselor in such matters ; really she was getting too old to take any interest in that sort of thing, and she never had been a matchmaker ! By the way now, was n't it odd that this neighbor, that rich capitalist across the bay, should be called Fletcher, and “ James Fletcher ” too, for Diego meant “ James ” in Spanish. Exactly the same name as poor “ Cousin Jim ” who disappeared. Did he remember her old playmate Jim ? But her brother thought something else was a deuced sight more odd, namely, that this same Don Diego Fletcher was said to be very sweet on Clementina now, and was always in her company at the Ramirez. And that, with this “ Clarion ” apology on the top of it, looked infernally queer.

Mrs. Ashwood felt a sudden consternation. Here had she — Jack's sister — just been taking Jack's probable rival into confidential correspondence! She turned upon Jack sharply:—

“Why did n't you say that before?”

“I did tell you,” he said gloomily, “but you did n't listen. But what difference does it make to you now?”

“None whatever,” said Mrs. Ashwood calmly as she walked out of the room.

Nevertheless the afternoon passed wearily, and her usual ride into the upland cañon did not reanimate her. For reasons known best to herself she did not take her after-dinner stroll along the shore to watch the outlying fog. At a comparatively early hour, while there was still a roseate glow in the western sky, she appeared with grim deliberation, and the blue lamp-shade in her hand, and placed it over the lamp which she lit and stood on her table beside the window. This done she sat down and began to write with bright-eyed but vicious complacency.

“But you don't want that light *and* the window, Constance,” said Jack wonderingly.

Mrs. Ashwood could not stand the dreadful twilight.

“But take away your lamp and you’ll have light enough from the sunset,” responded Jack.

That was just what she did n’t want! The light from the window was that horrid vulgar red glow which she hated. It might be very romantic and suit lovers like Jack, but as *she* had some work to do, she wanted the blue shade of the lamp to correct that dreadful glare.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN MILTON had rowed back without lifting his eyes to Mrs. Ashwood's receding figure. He believed that he was right in declining her invitation, although he had a miserable feeling that it entailed seeing her for the last time. With all that he believed was his previous experience of the affections, he was still so untutored as to be confused as to his reasons for declining, or his right to have been shocked and disappointed at her manner. It seemed to him sufficiently plain that he had offended the most perfect woman he had ever known without knowing more. The feeling he had for her was none the less powerful because, in his great simplicity, it was vague and unformulated. And it was a part of this strange simplicity that in his miserable loneliness his thoughts turned unconsciously to his dead wife for sympathy and consolation. Loo would have understood him!

Mr. Fletcher, who had received him on

his arrival with singular effusiveness and cordiality, had put off their final arrangements until after dinner, on account of pressing business. It was therefore with some surprise that an hour before the time he was summoned to Fletcher's room. He was still more surprised to find him sitting at his desk, from which a number of business papers and letters had been hurriedly thrust aside to make way for a manuscript. A single glance at it was enough to show the unhappy John Milton that it was the one he had sent to Mrs. Ashwood. The color flushed to his cheek and he felt a mist before his eyes. His employer's face, on the contrary, was quite pale, and his eyes were fixed on Harcourt with a singular intensity. His voice too, although under great control, was hard and strange.

"Read that," he said, handing the young man a letter.

The color again streamed into John Milton's face as he recognized the hand of Mrs. Ashwood, and remained there while he read it. When he put it down, however, he raised his frank eyes to Fletcher's, and said with a certain dignity and manliness: "What she says is the truth, sir. But it is

I alone who am at fault. This manuscript is merely *my* stupid idea of a very simple story she was once kind enough to tell me when we were talking of strange occurrences in real life, which she thought I might some time make use of in my work. I tried to embellish it, and failed. That's all. I will take it back, — it was written only for her."

There was such an irresistible truthfulness and sincerity in his voice and manner, that any idea of complicity with the sender was dismissed from Fletcher's mind. As Harcourt, however, extended his hand for the manuscript Fletcher interfered.

"You forget that you gave it to her, and she has sent it to me. If *I* don't keep it, it can be returned to her only. Now may I ask who is this lady who takes such an interest in your literary career? Have you known her long? Is she a friend of your family?"

The slight sneer that accompanied his question restored the natural color to the young man's face, but kindled his eye ominously.

"No," he said briefly. "I met her accidentally about two months ago and as accidentally found out that she had taken an interest in one of the first things I ever wrote

for your paper. She neither knew you nor me. It was then that she told me this story; she did not even then know who I was, though she had met some of my family. She was very good and has generously tried to help me."

Fletcher's eyes remained fixed upon him.

"But this tells me only *what* she is, not *who* she is."

"I am afraid you must inquire of her brother, Mr. Shipley," said Harcourt curtly.

"Shipley?"

"Yes; he is traveling with her for his health, and they are going south when the rains come. They are wealthy Philadelphians, I believe, and —and she is a widow."

Fletcher picked up her note and glanced again at the signature, "Constance Ashwood." There was a moment of silence, when he resumed in quite a different voice: "It's odd I never met them nor they me."

As he seemed to be waiting for a response, John Milton said simply: "I suppose it's because they have not been here long, and are somewhat reserved."

Mr. Fletcher laid aside the manuscript and letter, and took up his apparently suspended work.

“When you see this Mrs. — Mrs. Ashwood again, you might say” —

“I shall not see her again,” interrupted John Milton hastily.

Mr. Fletcher shrugged his shoulders. “Very well,” he said with a peculiar smile, “I will write to her. Now, Mr. Harcourt,” he continued with a sudden business brevity, “if you please, we ’ll drop this affair and attend to the matter for which I just summoned you. Since yesterday an important contract for which I have been waiting is concluded, and its performance will take me East at once. I have made arrangements that you will be left in the literary charge of the ‘Clarion.’ It is only a fitting recompense that the paper owes to you and your father, — to whom I hope to see you presently reconciled. But we won’t discuss that now! As my affairs take me back to Los Gatos within half an hour, I am sorry I cannot dispense my hospitality in person, — but you will dine and sleep here to-night. Good-by. As you go out will you please send up Mr. Jackson to me.” He nodded briefly, seemed to plunge instantly into his papers again, and John Milton was glad to withdraw.

The shock he had felt at Mrs. Ashwood's frigid disposition of his wishes and his manuscript had benumbed him to any enjoyment or appreciation of the change in his fortune. He wandered out of the house and descended to the beach in a dazed, bewildered way, seeing only the words of her letter to Fletcher before him, and striving to grasp some other meaning from them than their coldly practical purport. Perhaps this was her cruel revenge for his telling her not to write to him. Could she not have divined it was only his fear of what she might say! And now it was all over! She had washed her hands of him with the sending of that manuscript and letter, and he would pass out of her memory as a foolish, conceited ingrate, — perhaps a figure as wearily irritating and stupid to her as the cousin she had known. He mechanically lifted his eyes to the distant hotel; the glow was still in the western sky, but the blue lamp was already shining in the window. His cheek flushed quickly, and he turned away as if she could have seen his face. Yes — she despised him, and *that* was his answer!

When he returned, Mr. Fletcher had gone. He dragged through a dinner with

Mr. Jackson, Fletcher's secretary, and tried to realize his good fortune in listening to the subordinate's congratulations. "But I thought," said Jackson, "you had slipped up on your luck to-day, when the old man sent for you. He was quite white, and ready to rip out about something that had just come in. I suppose it was one of those anonymous things against your father, — the old man's dead set against 'em now." But John Milton heard him vaguely, and presently excused himself for a row on the moon-lit bay.

The active exertion, with intervals of placid drifting along the land-locked shore, somewhat soothed him. The heaving Pacific beyond was partly hidden in a low creeping fog, but the curving bay was softly radiant. The rocks whereon she sat that morning, the hotel where she was now quietly reading, were outlined in black and silver. In this dangerous contiguity it seemed to him that her presence returned, — not the woman who had met him so coldly; who had penned those lines; the woman from whom he was now parting forever, but the blameless ideal he had worshiped from the first, and which he now felt could never pass out of his

life again ! He recalled their long talks, their rarer rides and walks in the city ; her quick appreciation and ready sympathy ; her pretty curiosity and half-maternal consideration of his foolish youthful past ; even the playful way that she sometimes seemed to make herself younger as if to better understand him. Lingered at times in the shadow of the headland, he fancied he saw the delicate nervous outlines of her face near his own again ; the faint shading of her brown lashes, the soft intelligence of her gray eyes. Drifting idly in the placid moonlight, pulling feverishly across the swell of the channel, or lying on his oars in the shallows of the rocks, but always following the curves of the bay, like a bird circling around a lighthouse, it was far in the night before he at last dragged his boat upon the sand. Then he turned to look once more at her distant window. He would be away in the morning and he should never see it again ! It was very late, but the blue light seemed to be still burning unalterably and inflexibly.

But even as he gazed, a change came over it. A shadow seemed to pass before the blind ; the blue shade was lifted ; for an

instant he could see the colorless star-like point of the light itself show clearly. It was over now ; she was putting out the lamp. Suddenly he held his breath ! A roseate glow gradually suffused the window like a burning blush ; the curtain was drawn aside, and the red lamp-shade gleamed out surely and steadily into the darkness.

Transfigured and breathless in the moonlight, John Milton gazed on it. It seemed to him the dawn of Love !

CHAPTER XIII.

THE winter rains had come. But so plentifully and persistently, and with such fatal preparation of circumstance, that the long looked for blessing presently became a wonder, an anxiety, and at last a slowly widening terror. Before a month had passed every mountain, stream, and watercourse, surcharged with the melted snows of the Sierras, had become a great tributary ; every tributary a great river, until, pouring their great volume into the engorged channels of the American and Sacramento rivers, they overleaped their banks and became as one vast inland sea. Even to a country already familiar with broad and striking catastrophe, the flood was a phenomenal one. For days the sullen overflow lay in the valley of the Sacramento, enormous, silent, currentless — except where the surplus waters rolled through Carquinez Straits, San Francisco Bay, and the Golden Gate, and reappeared as the vanished Sacramento River, in an

outflowing stream of fresh and turbid water fifty miles at sea.

Across the vast inland expanse, brooded over by a leaden sky, leaden rain fell, dimpling like shot the sluggish pools of the flood; a cloudy chaos of fallen trees, drifting barns and outhouses, wagons and agricultural implements moved over the surface of the waters, or circled slowly around the outskirts of forests that stood ankle deep in ooze and the current, which in serried phalanx they resisted still. As night fell these forms became still more vague and chaotic, and were interspersed with the scattered lanterns and flaming torches of relief-boats, or occasionally the high terraced gleaming windows of the great steamboats, feeling their way along the lost channel. At times the opening of a furnace-door shot broad bars of light across the sluggish stream and into the branches of dripping and drift-encumbered trees; at times the looming smoke-stacks sent out a pent-up breath of sparks that illuminated the inky chaos for a moment, and then fell as black and dripping rain. Or perhaps a hoarse shout from some faintly outlined bulk on either side brought a quick response from the relief-boats, and the de-

taching of a canoe with a blazing pine-knot in its bow into the outer darkness.

It was late in the afternoon when Lawrence Grant, from the deck of one of the larger tugs, sighted what had been once the estuary of Sidon Creek. The leader of a party of scientific observation and relief, he had kept a tireless watch of eighteen hours, keenly noticing the work of devastation, the changes in the channel, the prospects of abatement, and the danger that still threatened. He had passed down the length of the submerged Sacramento valley, through the Straits of Carquinez, and was now steaming along the shores of the upper reaches of San Francisco Bay. Everywhere the same scene of desolation, — vast stretches of *tule* land, once broken up by cultivation and dotted with dwellings, now clearly erased on that watery chart; long lines of symmetrical perspective, breaking the monotonous level, showing orchards buried in the flood; Indian mounds and natural eminences covered with cattle or hastily erected camps; half submerged houses, whose solitary chimneys, however, still gave signs of an undaunted life within; isolated groups of trees, with their lower branches heavy with the unwholesome

fruit of the flood, in wisps of hay and straw, rakes and pitchforks, or pathetically sheltering some shivering and forgotten household pet. But everywhere the same dull, expressionless, placid tranquillity of destruction,—a horrible leveling of all things in one bland smiling equality of surface, beneath which agony, despair, and ruin were deeply buried and forgotten; a catastrophe without convulsion,—a devastation voiceless, passionless, and supine.

The boat had slowed up before what seemed to be a collection of disarranged houses with the current flowing between lines that indicated the existence of thoroughfares and streets. Many of the lighter wooden buildings were huddled together on the street corners with their gables to the flow; some appeared as if they had fallen on their knees, and others lay complacently on their sides, like the houses of a child's toy village. An elevator still lifted itself above the other warehouses; from the centre of an enormous square pond, once the *plaza*, still arose a "Liberty pole," or flagstaff, which now supported a swinging lantern, and in the distance appeared the glittering dome of some public building. Grant recognized the

scene at once. It was all that was left of the invincible youth of Tasajara !

As this was an objective point of the scheme of survey and relief for the district, the boat was made fast to the second story of one of the warehouses. It was now used as a general store and depot, and bore a singular resemblance in its interior to Harcourt's grocery at Sidon. This suggestion was the more fatefully indicated by the fact that half a dozen men were seated around a stove in the centre, more or less given up to a kind of philosophical and lazy enjoyment of their enforced idleness. And when to this was added the more surprising coincidence that the party consisting of Billings, Peters, and Wingate,—former residents of Sidon and first citizens of Tasajara,—the resemblance was complete.

They were ruined,—but they accepted their common fate with a certain Indian stoicism and Western sense of humor that for the time lifted them above the vulgar complacency of their former fortunes. There was a deep-seated, if coarse and irreverent resignation in their philosophy. At the beginning of the calamity it had been roughly formulated by Billings in the statement that

"it was n't anybody's fault ; there was nobody to kill, and what could n't be reached by a Vigilance Committee there was no use resoolootin' over." When the Reverend Doctor Pilsbury had suggested an appeal to a Higher Power, Peters had replied, good humoredly, that "a Creator who could fool around with them in that style was above being interfered with by prayer." At first the calamity had been a thing to fight against ; then it became a practical joke, the sting of which was lost in the victims' power of endurance and assumed ignorance of its purport. There was something almost pathetic in their attempts to understand its peculiar humor.

"How about that Europ-e-an trip o' yours, Peters?" said Billings, meditatively, from the depths of his chair. "Looks as if those Crowned Heads over there would have to wait till the water goes down considerable afore you kin trot out your wife and darters before 'em !"

"Yes," said Peters, "it rather pints that way ; and ez far ez I kin see, Mame Billings ain't goin' to no Saratoga, neither, this year."

"Reckon the boys won't hang about old Harcourt's Free Library to see the girls

home from lectures and singing-class much this year," said Wingate. "Wonder if Harcourt ever thought o' this the day he opened it, and made that rattlin' speech o' his about the new property? Clark says everything built on that made ground has got to go after the water falls. Rough on Harcourt after all his other losses, eh? He oughter have closed up with that scientific chap, Grant, and married him to Clementina while the big boom was on" —

"Hush!" said Peters, indicating Grant, who had just entered quietly.

"Don't mind me, gentlemen," said Grant, stepping towards the group with a grave but perfectly collected face; "on the contrary, I am very anxious to hear all the news of Harcourt's family. I left for New York before the rainy season, and have only just got back."

His speech and manner appeared to be so much in keeping with the prevailing grim philosophy that Billings, after a glance at the others, went on. "Ef you left afore the first rains," said he, "you must have left only the steamer ahead of Fletcher, when he run off with Clementina Harcourt, and you might have come across them on their wedding trip in New York."

Not a muscle of Grant's face changed under their eager and cruel scrutiny. "No, I did n't," he returned quietly. "But why did she run away? Did the father object to Fletcher? If I remember rightly he was rich and a good match."

"Yes, but I reckon the old man had n't quite got over the 'Clarion' abuse, for all its eating humble-pie and taking back its yarns of him. And may be he might have thought the engagement rather sudden. They say that she'd only met Fletcher the day afore the engagement."

"That be d—d," said Peters, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and startling the lazy resignation of his neighbors by taking his feet from the stove and sitting upright. "I tell ye, gentlemen, I'm sick o' this sort o' hog-wash that's been ladled round to us. That gal Clementina Harcourt and that feller Fletcher had met not only once, but *many* times afore — yes! they were old friends if it comes to that, a matter of six years ago."

Grant's eyes were fixed eagerly on the speaker, although the others scarcely turned their heads.

"You know, gentlemen," said Peters, "I

never took stock in this yer story of the drownin' of 'Lige Curtis. Why? Well, if you wanten know — in my opinion — there never was any 'Lige Curtis!"

Billings lifted his head with difficulty; Wingate turned his face to the speaker.

"There never was a scrap o' paper ever found in his cabin with the name o' 'Lige Curtis on it; there never was any inquiry made for 'Lige Curtis; there never was any sorrowin' friends comin' after 'Lige Curtis. For why? — There never was any 'Lige Curtis. The man who passed himself off in Sidon under that name — was that man Fletcher. That's how he knew all about Harcourt's title; that's how he got his best holt on Harcourt. And he did it all to get Clementina Harcourt, whom the old man had refused to him in Sidon."

A grunt of incredulity passed around the circle. Such is the fate of historical innovation! Only Grant listened attentively.

"Ye ought to tell that yarn to John Milton," said Wingate ironically; "it's about in the style o' them stories he slings in the 'Clarion.'"

"He's made a good thing outer that job. Wonder what he gets for them?" said Peters.

It was Billings's time to rise, and, under the influence of some strong cynical emotion, to even rise to his feet. "Gets for 'em! — *gets* for 'em! I'll tell you *what* he gets for 'em! It beats this story o' Peters's, — it beats the flood. It beats me! Ye know that boy, gentlemen; ye know how he uster lie round his father's store, reading flapdoodle stories and sich! Ye remember how I uster try to give him good examples and knock some sense into him? Ye remember how, after his father's good luck, he spiled all his own chances, and ran off with his father's waiter gal — all on account o' them flapdoodle books he read? Ye remember how he sashayed round newspaper offices in 'Frisco until he could write a flapdoodle story himself? Ye wanter know what he gets for 'em. I'll tell you. He got an interdution to one of them high-toned, high-falutin', 'don't-touch-me' rich widders from Philadelfy, — that's what he gets for 'em! He got her dead set on him and his stories, — that's what he gets for 'em! He got her to put him up with Fletcher in the 'Clarion,' — that's what he gets for 'em. And darn my skin! — ef what they say is true, while we hard-working men are sittin' here

like drowned rats — that air John Milton, ez never did a stitch o' live work like me 'n' yere; ez never did anythin' but spin yarns about *us* ez did *work*, is now 'gittin' for 'em' — what? Guess! Why, he's gittin' *the rich widder herself* and *half a million dollars with her!* Gentlemen! lib'ty is a good thing — but thar's some things ye gets too much lib'ty of in this country — and that's this yer LIB'TY OF THE PRESS!”





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